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Heidi Pauwels

Cultural Exchange in Eighteenth-Century India: Poetry and Paintings from Kishangarh

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It might be fair to judge Heidi Pauwels's latest book on poetry and painting from the Rajput court of Kishangarh by its cover. A painting depicts eyes irrigating a garden of poetry with a river of tears. The verses, laid in rectangular text blocks inscribed in green calligraphy, narrate this image: the beloved Laylā is so dangerously beautiful that, upon seeing her, her lover cannot help but cry. One couplet reads, "A fountain springs from the eyes, a waterfall of pain. As long as the heart's soil is pure, the verdant garden of love will remain" (255). The painting dates to ca. 1750–75, and the poetry is by Mahārāja Sāvant Singh (1699–1764) alias Nāgarīdās—a poet-cum-patron and true aesthete of his time. While Nāgarīdās is known for his large corpus of old Hindi Braj Bhāṣā devotional poetry (*bhakti*) for the Hindu lord Kṛṣṇa, the poem inscribed on Pauwels's cover, the *Īṣq-caman*, "The Garden of Love," is in the Rekhtā vernacular of early Urdu. What does a Rajput poet's Rekhtā poetry tell us about cultural exchange in eighteenth-century India? Answering this relatively specific and difficult question allows Pauwels to unravel a number of issues related to cultural circulation and word and image.

Although key visual characteristics of Kishangarhi painting have been well defined—the bow-like brows and elongated eyes of its figures are emblematic—a study that integrates philology and art history is unprecedented. Drawing upon diligent archival research, Pauwels makes a core case for how inscriptional, textual, and literary evidence can illuminate the meaning of paintings, which, in turn, can foster fruitful reinterpretations of textual evidence. Her book makes its case through three interwoven chapters preceded by an introduction, which immediately opens by refuting notions of the eighteenth century as a period of decline. Instead, Pauwels demonstrates the ingenuity of artists and patrons who were operating in a fluid world in the wake of the Mughal Empire.

The first chapter sketches the landscape of eighteenth-century North Indian literary culture during the reign of the Mughal emperor Muḥammad Shāh (r. 1718–48) in Delhi. It contextualizes both the conditions under which Nāgarīdās wrote Rekhtā poetry and the linguistic idiom for which he is known, the early Hindi vernacular of Braj Bhāṣā. It also introduces the poet Vrind whose oeuvre combined a wide range of trans- and interregional vernaculars. His career began in Rajasthan, where he received the patronage of many regional Hindu and Muslim nobles. In 1673, he was introduced to the court of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb "Alimgīr" (1658–1707). Through Aurangzeb's sponsorship, he traveled to the Deccan and Bengal before returning back to Rajasthan. Vrind's movements mirrored the mobility of both poets and painters of the period. Through her discussion of Vrind, Pauwels reveals a crucial shift, from court-centric to a salon-centric cultural production. She argues that the literary salon (*majlis*) falls short of Habermas's public sphere (49), which has been widely applied to Indian literature, and instead posits Christopher Bayly's premodern *ecumene*, with its emphasis on "cultural performance," as a more apt model (25).

Chapter 2 examines the dialogues between courtly painting and Nāgarīdās's experimentation with Rekhtā within the Kishangarh court inaugurated by Kishan Singh (1575–1615). Closely linked to the Mughals through marriage, the court under Kishan Singh was an integrated world that found full expression in both literature and painting. Courtly scenes became cosmopolitan soirées in which Mughal and Kishangarhi nobles, courtiers, patrons, poets, musicians, and dancers met and partook in various forms of exchange. Paintings constituted a veritable "who's who" of the Kishangarhi literary

scene (73), and many poets found similar representation in Nāgarīdās's verses. The close correspondence between poetic and visual imagery, Pauwels suggests, brings both text and painting to life: "We can nearly hear the poetry, undoubtedly of Nāgarīdās's songs, that led the devotee Muralīdās to swoon" (80). Like the heterogeneity of these soirées, Pauwels shows how easily Nāgarīdās deployed both Persianate and Hindu devotional (*bhakti*) idioms in his Rekhtā, sometimes in the same breath.

The high point of the book is Pauwels's analysis of the *Ísq-caman* ("Garden of Love") featured on the cover of the book. In addition to performing a close reading of its multivalent themes and imagery, she also examines its reception. With philological elegance she brings Nāgarīdās's Rekhtā alive for the reader. She pinpoints the Persianate themes, in particular its allusions to the frequently illustrated Perso-Arab Laylā-Majnūn romance. In so doing, she also provides a model for applying early modern classificatory principles of poetic devices to a literary text. She deploys criteria of the period developed by the Urdu poet Mir Taqī Mir (1723–1810) and focuses on techniques such as metrical and semantic parallelism in rhymed phrases (*tarāzī*) (118). In assessing the reception of the work, Pauwels engages Molly Aitken's well-known discussions of repetition and response in Rajput art (*The Intelligence of Tradition*, 2010). Pauwels's facility with text, however, enables her to more precisely identify key works as being specifically from Nāgarīdās's *Ísq-caman*. In one particular Laylā-Majnūn painting, she interprets a nineteenth-century inscription, overlooked by Aitken in her otherwise lauded book, as attesting to a reflexivity concerning notions of model and copy. The inscription reads: "All say, 'Majnūn is true [*asala*], the others seem fake [*nakala*]. If your heart holds some truth, only then try to replicate'" (126). Pauwels additionally reveals another layer of reception and circulation by establishing that the painting's probable patron, the Mewar ruler Aḍī Singh (r. 1761–73), subsequently authored the *Rasik-caman* ("The Connoisseurs' Garden") as a response to the *Ísq-caman*.

The third and final chapter provides a synoptic reading of Kishangarhi painting with Nāgarīdās's literary output. The chapter opens by tracing the itineraries of known artists, such as Bhavānīdās (active ca. 1700–1748) and his son Dalcand, who started their careers in Mughal ateliers, but who later migrated to regional courts where they were freer to experiment with new genres (humor and devotion, for instance). From there, Pauwels focuses on Nāgarīdās's collaborations with famed painter Nihālcand (1710–1782). Here, Pauwels first examines paintings that represent literal depictions of poetry before suggesting possible inspirations for works lacking any explicitly attached text. In the former, the correlation between painting and poetry is made clear through the presence of text on the verso. In addition, Nihālcand infuses his paintings with his own interpretations, possibly under the instruction of his patron, lending degrees of variation from the associated text. In identifying un-inscribed works to have poetic inspirations, Pauwels combines her vast expertise in literary sources with a perspicacious eye for visual detail to convincingly suggest their sources, some of which, she notes, may have been intentionally multivalent.

The book concludes with a final discussion of the *Ísq-caman*, taking into account also the significance of calligraphy. Because a study of Indic calligraphy, and particularly of *devanāgarī*, has yet to be written, Pauwels's comments are particularly useful in recognizing the importance of the art for early modern poets. Nāgarīdās's poems express a keen interest in the visual nature of script. In one example, he writes, "'Nagari' (script) has taken the form of eyes" (199). Nāgarīdās's reflexivity about script and its visuality may locate his agency as a patron of these calligraphies.

Pauwels's book represents a major contribution to multiple fields and modes of inquiry. From a methodological perspective, she moves beyond seeing visual imagery as primarily documentary and instead demonstrates how painting engaged poetry in multiple and complex ways. By emphasizing mobility and circulation, she additionally relocates innovation in the eighteenth century from the center to what would have once been considered the periphery of the Mughal world. Kishangarh may not have been Mughal Delhi, but its poets and painters made it a cultural center. The book's added benefits include an extensive glossary and two appendixes of the text and translations. Incidental errors include mistransliterations, especially of Perso-Arabic/Urdu words, occasional typos, and the absence of important illustrations.

If it is not obvious, the days when meager language study can suffice for the scholar of Indian painting are over. Reading the captions is not enough. Nevertheless, there is still a need for connoisseurship and close analysis of style. Pauwels's book is enabled by a dual engagement with new currents in art history and literary studies that consider closely the Kishangarhi style (Navina Haidar, *The Kishangarh school of painting*, c. 1680–1850, PhD thesis, Oxford University, 1995), the effects of repetition (Molly Aitken, 2010), and mobility and circulation (Francesca Orsini and Samira Sheikh, *After Timur Left*, 2014; Allison Busch and Thomas de Bruijn, *Culture and Circulation*, 2014).

Though the case of Kishangarh seems exceptional because of the close synthesis of poetry, painting, and patronage, I would venture that we would not have to look far for other cases. What about the Mughal governor 'Abd al-Rahīm Khān-i Khānān (1556–1626) who was a Hindi poet and patron of painting? And if these remarks somehow seem unmeasured, I do not wish to suggest that all art historians must also be philologists. Philology is only one tool with which to approach paintings. From the analysis of pigments to iconography, Indian painting needs it all. What Pauwels's book reminds

us, however, is that literature is a key to unlocking India's painted traditions—a reminder that has been repeated time and time again. All too seldom does a literary scholar heed that call. For how can we apprehend the aesthetic dimensions of Sāvānt Singh's garden without his poetry?

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