
Examination of Three Hero-Stones from Chamba, Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract: During the early 18th century, two Rajas of Chamba – Raja Udai Singh (r. 1690–1720) and Raja Ugar Singh (r. 1720–35) – were assassinated by their respective courts. As the Rajas died issueless, their death was commemorated in the form of Hero-stones placed at two prominent temples at Chamba. The formal and stylistic analysis of the four hero-stones suggests a deviation from the sculpture tradition of the region and the influence of the regional miniature painting style and iconography instead. The purpose of this paper is to comprehend the syncretic nature of the visual culture of mid-18th-century Chamba by comparing hero-stones with Chamba portraiture. It also seeks to illustrate the status of painters in the Chamba society of the 18th century, the nature of their relationship to one another, and the hierarchy among the various craftsmen.

Keywords: Hero-Stones, Chamba, Himachal Pradesh, Pahari Painting, Iconography, Himalayan Sculpture, Bharmour

Introduction

There is no known consensus among scholars regarding the origin and provenance of the many schools of Pahari miniature painting. In recent years, there has been a great deal of interest in the social and private lives of the Pahari miniature painters, and scholars have begun to investigate corroborating evidence about them, including state annals, genealogical rolls, copper-plate charters, and other art forms such as woodcarving and embroidery. While the relationship between the painter and his patron has remained a popular and well-researched topic in the study of Pahari painting, less attention has been paid to the painter's social standing as an individual and in comparison, to other craftspeople. In the framework of the art history of the North-Western Himalayas, the sculptural tradition of Chamba, notably the hero-stones, has received little attention. A comparative study of the hero-stones of Chamba and the local tradition of portrait painting could not only shed light on the bilateral exchange of iconography between the painting and sculpture traditions of Chamba, but it could also shed light on the status of the miniature painter within the social

structure of Chamba and his popularity among the other artisans in the region. For the purposes of this study, the researcher examined the two hero-stones of Raja Udai Singh (r. 1690–1720), and one of Raja Ugar Singh (r. 1720–1735).



Figure 1: Hero-stone in the western wall of Vajreshwari Temple, Chamba. 13th century CE (Photo: Sarang Sharma)



Figure 2: Hero-stone from the village Luddu, Chamba. 16th century CE. Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba (Photo: Sarang Sharma)

History of Hero-Stones in Chamba

The hero-stones at Chamba, locally known as 'Autar', were constructed to commemorate issueless deceased who passed away untimely. Usually placed near ponds, fountains, temples, and under sacred fig (pipal) trees, the hero-stones are primarily believed to have been commissioned by the royal family, Rajput nobility, and the Brahmin clergy. Although no known date regarding the beginning of the tradition of hero-stones at Chamba has come to light, the earliest hero-stones preserved at the Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, are dateable to the 13th century (Figure 1). The presence of hero-stones in the frontier provinces of the erstwhile princely state of Chamba, such as Churah and Bharmour, also reveals to us that the tradition was not limited to the capital of Chamba but was in vogue in the remote areas as well, where the likenesses of influential Ranas were commemorated. The early hero-stones are largely

unidentifiable, due to the lack of inscriptions on any of the plaques, as well as the unavailability of comparative material to examine the physical attributes of the subject. Among the only criterion available to identity the hero-stones are to study the genealogical records of the local Ranas to look for couples who passed away 'la-vald' (Persian for issueless), as those who encountered an untimely demise without a male heir were commemorated in hero-stones. Evidence suggests that the tradition of hero-stones must have continued to the beginning of the 20th century, before being replaced by photography¹.

Characteristics of Hero-Stones at Chamba

The hero-stones of Chamba are sandstone bas-reliefs. The hero-stone is mostly made in tabular shape and is either square or rectangular, with a maximum height of 14 inches. There does not appear to be an interruption in the iconographic syntax of the hero-stones widespread in Chamba. The plaques comprise of the front-facing figures of the male and the female seated cross-legged within a domed architectural setting (Figure 2). The male holds one hand to his torso in jnana-mudra, while the other hand lies on the ground in bhumisparsha-mudra. The female is frequently represented with her hands clasped in adoration. The religious orientation of the family is generally denoted by the representation of either a Linga, Shaisha or Vishnu on the domed superstructure. The homogeneity in the representation of hero-stones from the 13th century to the 19th century implies that the iconography remained fixed, with no space for modifications or improvisation throughout the years. The two hero-stones of Raja Udai Singh (r. 1690—1720), however, breaks away from the norm and demonstrates a substantial impact of various art forms on the sculptural legacy of Chamba, particularly miniature painting. The identification of the hero-stones of Raja Udai Singh was done by the researcher by taking into consideration the Raja's political as well as private life, which is vital to examine prior to engaging with his hero-stones.

Raja Udai Singh (r. 1690—1720)

Raja Udai Singh was the son of Raja Chattar Singh of Chamba (r. 1664—1690) (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 309). Though the year of Udai Singh's birth remains unknown, it is implied that Udai Singh was a minor when he ascended the throne of Chamba in 1690 CE, as Jai Singh, Chattar Singh's younger brother and Wazir, was named regent and Wazir to Udai Singh (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 309). The young Udai Singh is described as intelligent and accomplished, and his reign began on a promising note. Hutchison and Vogel assert that the prosperity and triumph of Chamba during Udai Singh's early reign were a result of Jai Singh's effective governance (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 310). Although Udai Singh's reign began in auspicious fashion, following Jai Singh's death in 1696, the young Raja succumbed to wicked temptations and devoted to sensuous pleasures, distancing himself from his people's allegiance (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 310).

The state's government became increasingly disorganised and reached a zenith when the Raja elevated a barber, whose daughter he had fallen in love with, to the office of

wazir, ceding full authority to him (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 310). Finally, the officials plotted Udai Singh's assassination and decided to put his younger brother Lakshman Singh on the Chamba throne (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 310). Previously, Lakshman Singh had succumbed to their schemes and joined the conspirators, and a date was set for Udai Singh to hunt on the left bank of the Ravi (today known as Udaipur), around 5 kilometres from Chamba (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 310). Udai Singh, sensing danger, emerged from his tent, a sword in hand (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 310). Lakshman Singh, moved by his appeal, abandoned the conspirators, and assumed a position alongside his brother (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 310). On this, the officials ordered Lakshman Singh's assassination first, followed by the Raja's mortal wounding (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 311). He died a few days later (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 311).

Udai Singh died in 1720 CE (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 311). As he left no heir to succeed him, he was succeeded by Ugar Singh, his cousin and the son of Mahipat Singh, Chattar Singh's brother (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 311). Ugar Singh was appointed to the throne of Chamba with the help of Raja Dhrub-Dev of Jammu (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 311). It is said that the ghost of the murdered Raja Udai Singh used to haunt the Chamba palace, causing distress to Ugar Singh (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 311). To lay the evil spirit, he erected a temple near the place of the murder (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 311). The temple is still in existence and the tax, called *Tirsera Udai Singhiana Autariana*, was collected till Chamba joined the Indian republic (Personal communication with Bhuvaneshwar Sharma).

The Hero-Stone of Raja Udai Singh at Udaipur, Chamba

The hero-stone of Udai Singh at Udaipur is divided into five registers (Figure 3). The uppermost register is occupied with the depiction of *Sheshashyai* Vishnu – Vishnu reclining on the Shesha with Laxmi tending to him. The representation of Vishnu is the signifier of Udai Singh's religious inclinations, whose adherence to Vaishnavism is testified by the Vaishnavite subject-matter which remained in vogue during this period. Udai Singh is seated in the centre of the second register, reclining on a large bolster. The other registers contain the depiction of his twenty-two wives. At the centre of the last register is the depiction of a doorway in the form of Persian *iwan*, identified by the design of the arch decorated with two flower buds on either side. There appear to be traces of a damaged figure at the doorway. Flowering vines run on the left and right borders of the hero-stones, while a striped *durrie* – a common element in portraiture of Chamba Rajas, is depicted on the lower margin.

The Hero-Stone of Raja Udai Singh at the Vamsigopala Temple, Chamba

The hero-stone of Udai Singh at the Vamsigopala temple (Figure 4) appears superior in decoration and workmanship compared to the hero-stone at the Udai Singh temple. The Bamsigopala temple hero-stone appears to have been made earlier than the

Udaipur hero-stone, and the Udaipur hero-stone must have been made after the construction of the temple at Udaipur, which must have taken a few years to build. While the design and layout of the Bamsigopala hero-stone is rather similar to the Udaipur hero-stone, nonetheless, the influence of painting tradition on the former is considerably noticeable. The lotus flowers and shoots appear to be inspired from Chamba painting (Figure 5). The painting influence further extends to the depiction of the apparel of Udai Singh and his Ranis – particularly the folds on the sleeves.



Figure 3: Hero-stone of Raja Udai Singh in the shrine at Udaipur, Chamba. c. 1720 CE
(Photo: Sarang Sharma and Bhupinder Sharma)



Figure 4: Hero-stone of Raja Udai Singh in the shrine at the Vamsigopala temple, c.1720 CE (Photo: Sarang Sharma and Bhupinder Sharma)

Hero Stone of Raja Ugar Singh

Very much like Udai Singh, Ugar Singh was popular at first, but soon fell against favour with his officials who wanted to appoint his cousin Dalel Singh as the Raja (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 311). He set fire to the town of Chamba in 1735 and

thereafter fled up the Ravi valley (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 311). When passing through the village of Juh in Chanota, he was wounded in the thigh by a bullet fired by the Rana of Gurola. He fled to Kangra, where he soon afterwards died (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 311).

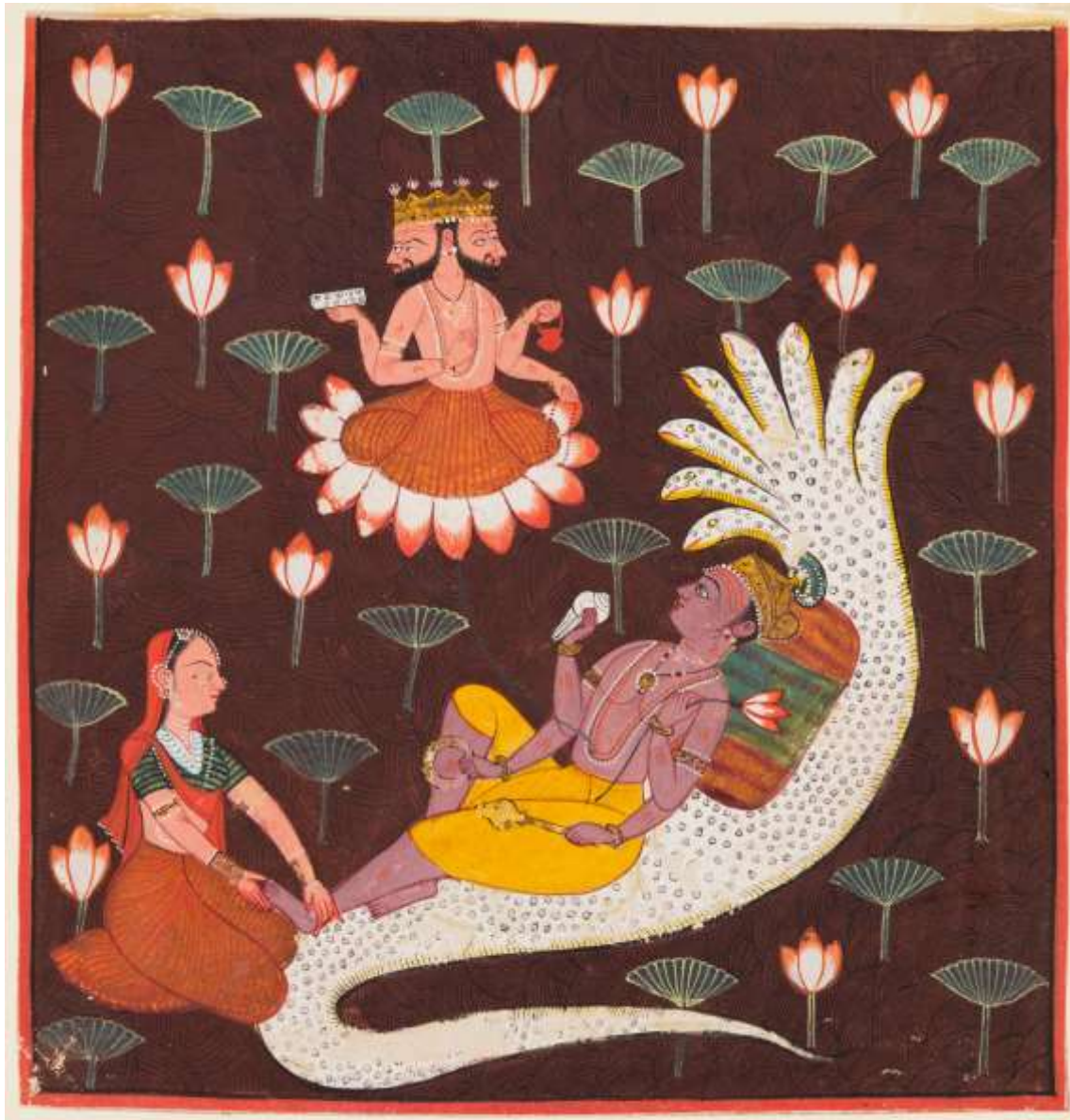


Figure 5: Vishnu on Ananta, the Endless Serpent, c. 1700. Northern India, Himachal Pradesh, Pahari Kingdom of Chamba. Gum tempera and gold on paper; page: 17.8 x 17.6 cm (7 x 6 15/16 in.); image: 17.1 x 16.7 cm (6 3/4 x 6 9/16 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase and partial gift from the Catherine and Ralph Benkaim Collection; Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund 2018.155.

The hero-stone of Ugar Singh (Figure 6) depicts the Raja sitting in company of his four wives. The Vishnu panel noticed in the uppermost register of the two hero-stones of Uday Singh is replaced with a Shiva linga, suggesting Umed Singh's religious

inclination towards Shaivism. The multifoil cusped arch which enframes the register depicting Umed Singh and his wives appears to be inspired from the painting tradition, as (1) the arch design is not seen in sculptures or woodcarvings made earlier than the mid-17th century; and (2) ornamented arched structures like these are associated with Mughal architecture. As the manifestation of this architectural embellishment is not witnessed in any temples or palaces constructed prior to this period, it is safe to assume that the motif was introduced in Chamba in mid-17th century by painters trained in the popular Mughal tradition.



Figure 6: Hero-stone of Raja Ugar Singh in the shrine at the Vamsigopala temple, c. 1735 CE (Photo: Sarang Sharma and Bhupinder Sharma)

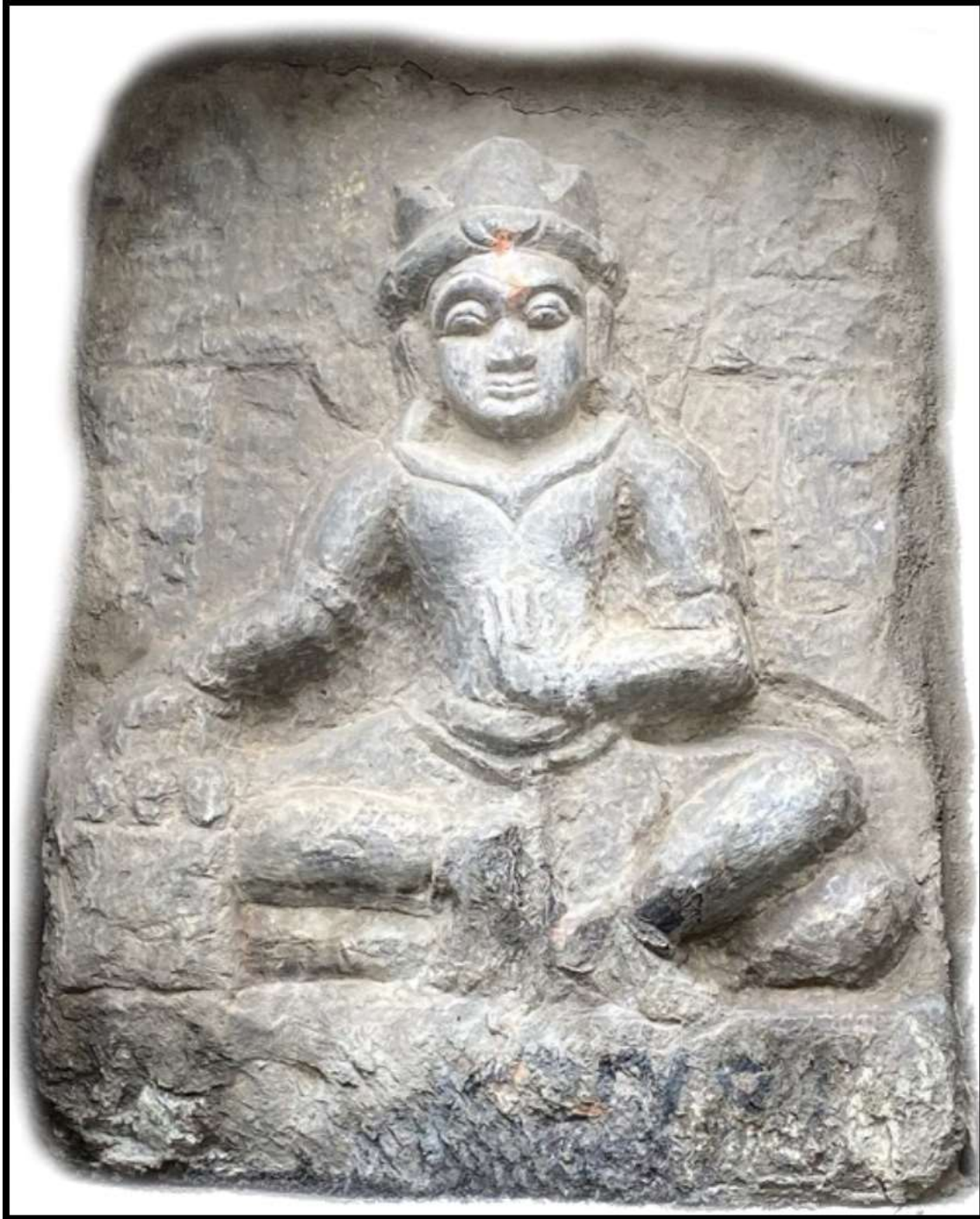


Figure 7: Unidentified hero-stone on the western wall of the Laxmi Narayana Temple, Chamba. C. 14th century CE (Photo: Sarang Sharma)

Miniature Painting Influence on the Hero-Stones

The layout of the four hero-stones is dissimilar to the unidentified hero-stones in the Laxmi Naryana temple complex (Figure 7) and marks the advent of painting sensibilities in the sculptural culture of the region. The design and space-division of the four hero-stones is highly similar to the work of the painter Laharu of Chamba, who is

ascribed a Bhagavata Purana (dated 1758). In a fashion similar to the hero-stones, Laharu also composes the painting in registers, with the top register appearing as the courtyard in which the narrative takes place, while the lower register, which is usually comprised of doorways and arched windows, denotes of the outer walls of the building (Figure 8). On comparing the layout of the hero-stones of the four Rajas to the space-division applied by Laharu, not only is the influence of the painting tradition on the sculpture of Chamba is felt, the layout of the hero-stones is also explained. The hero-stones are designed in the form of a chamber, perhaps the Raja's heavenly abode, with lowest register becoming the outer wall. The Raja, as observed in the hero-stones of Udai Singh, sits at the end of the chamber, surrounded by his Ranis, who pay him respect with folded hands. The top portion of the hero-stone is received to the deity the Raja prayed to.

While the influence of the painting motifs and sensibilities on the hero-stones is established, the symbolism of the hero-stones has also influenced the painting tradition of this period. On observing the depiction of the Rajas in the hero-stones, the researcher observed that the deceased Rajas are always shown pointing a finger towards their torso. The symbolism of this gesture is mired with mystery, and no plausible explanation could be given to what the expression signifies. However, its repetition in the depiction of the deceased Raja suggests that the gesture is associated with the hero-stone tradition, and hence, must symbolise the passing-away of the chieftain. The researcher maintains that the practice of showing the deceased with a finger pointed towards their torso predates the painting tradition, a fact solidified by the two hero-stones at the Laxmi Narayana temple, in which the Rajas are also shown making the same indication. The symbolism appears to have been adopted in the painting tradition, particularly in portraiture, in which the gesture became a recurring symbolic device to denote the demise of the subject.

Hero-Stone Iconography in Chamba Portraiture

The earliest available painting in which a Raja of Chamba is depicted in this manner is the portrait of Raja Chattar Singh of Chamba in the Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio (Figure 9). The Raja appears to be old and frail, contrary to his conventional depiction as a towering muscular man. The details regarding the death of Chattar Singh remains unknown, and the portrait suggests that the Raja might have died due to some illness. The researcher maintains that the portrait must have been recorded immediately after the demise of Chattar Singh in 1690 CE. What is notable about the portrait is that the Raja is depicted seated within a framed casing, the shape of which is similar to the hero-stones at the Laxmi Narayana Temple.

Another portrait was identified by the researcher in the Cleveland Museum of Art (Figure 10), in which Chattar Singh is depicted seated with his brother Jai Singh, and his son and successor Udai Singh. In the portrait Chattar Singh and Jai Singh are depicted making the same hand gesture, while Udai Singh's hand gesture is in a manner which is seen in several portraits from Chamba during this period. Chattar

Singh's depiction is based on his previous portrait, while Jai Singh and Udai Singh are added to the composition by the painter. The painting, in all likelihood, appears to have been painted after the passing away of Jai Singh in 1696. Jai Singh had served as the Wazir and regent of Udai Singh till his death, hence, the painting symbolises Udai Singh's lead as the Raja of Chamba.

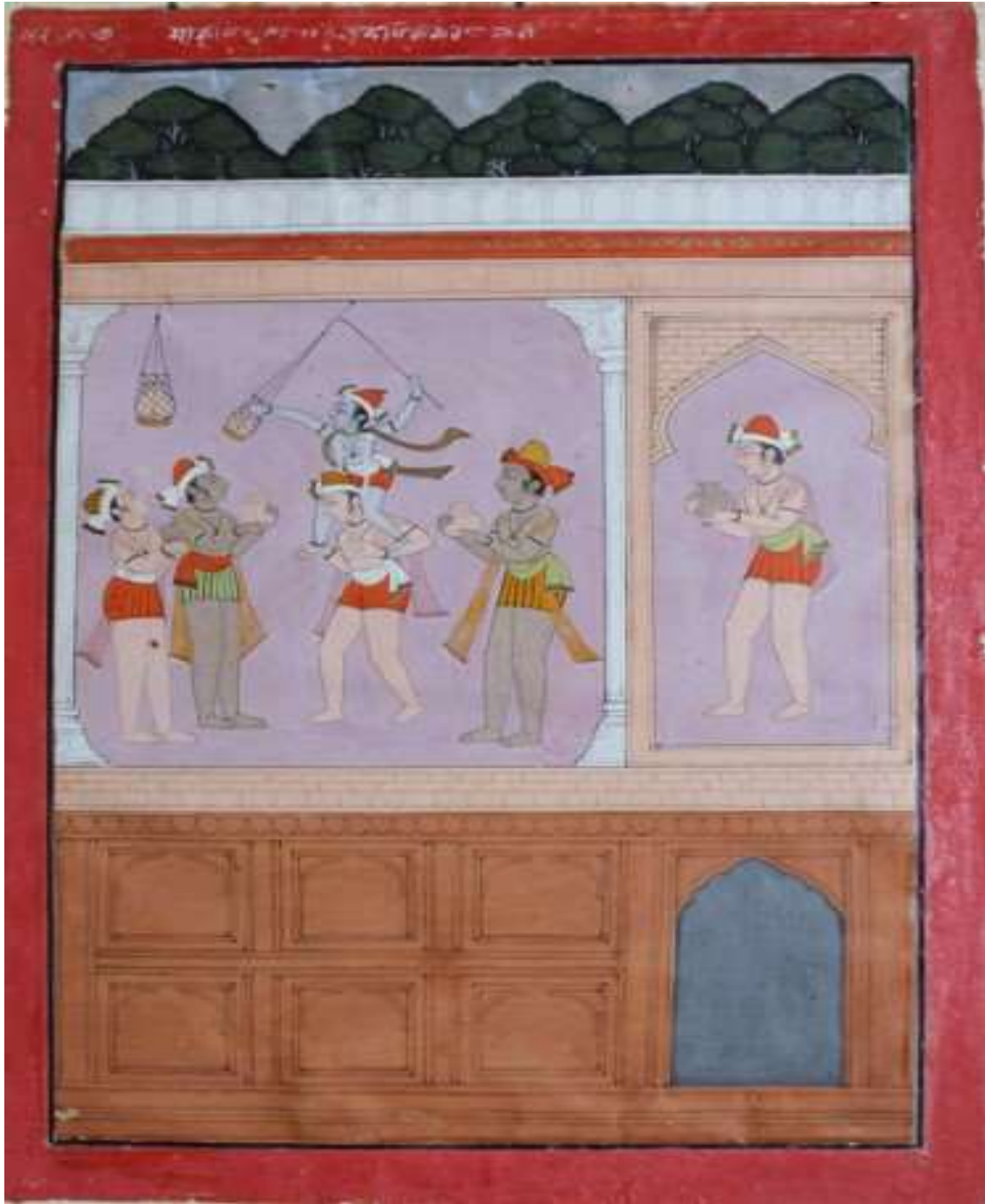


Figure 8: Krishna kills the Demoness Putana, Ascribed to Laharu of Chamba, Folio from a vertical Bhagavata Purana series, c. 1750-75, 28.5 (25.5) x 20.3 (17.3) cm, Acc. no. 1908 D.13, Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba.



Figure 9: Raja Chattar Singh smoking, c. 1680. Northern India, Himachal Pradesh, Pahari Kingdom of Chamba. Page: 19.7 x 16.4 cm (7 3/4 x 6 7/16 in.); Image: 15.3 x 12.6 cm (6 x 4 15/16 in.). Purchase and partial gift from the Catherine and Ralph Benkaim Collection; Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund 2018.109.



Figure 10: Raja Chhattar Singh with Jai Singh and young Udai Singh, 1696 CE. Northern India, Himachal Pradesh, Pahari Kingdom of Chamba. Ink and color on paper. Page: 20.3 x 31 cm (8 x 12 3/16 in.); Image: 16.2 x 26.5 cm (6 3/8 x 10 7/16 in.). Mr. and Mrs. William H. Marlatt Fund 1960.47.

The Painter as a Craftsman

The inhabitation of craftsmen and artisans including tinkerers, sculptors, woodcarvers, carpenters, and painters has historically been in the lower terrace, suggestive of their social and economic standing (personal observation of the researcher). As a result of it, these would generally form matrimonial ties amongst themselves. It is maintained by the descendants of one painter family in Chamba that their ancestors were Brahmins of the Manikantha gotra, tracing their origin to Gujarat (personal communication with Hansraj Dhiman), a fact supported by the bahis at Haridwar (Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 129). However, today the family is considered Dhiman, an artisan caste which is categorised under the Government of India's Other Backward Class (OBC)². Similar is the case of the descendants of Nainsukh, who were patronised by Raja Raj Singh of Chamba (r. 1764–94) and given land in the village of Rajol (Hutchison and Vogel 1933: 311), where members of the family are still residing. The family surname is 'Raina', which is a Brahmin caste of Kashmiri origin, but members of the family can only marry among Dhimans (personal communication with Anil Raina, a descendant of Nainsukh).

In the view of the researcher, the change in caste took place due to the choice of profession which was taken by the painters. As these families migrated to Chamba from different locations, they must have preserved their original caste identity³. However, they must have been treated as artisans by the Raja as (1) the allocation of land which was made by the Rajas did not place them in the upper terrace, unlike the

priestly Brahmins who were migrating from Kashi and Banaras; and (2) the painters used animal glue – formed with the collagen from skins, bones and tendons of horses – a practice which made them appear lower in status to the clergy and the nobility of Chamba. The involvement of miniaturists trained in the popular Mughal tradition starts becoming evident in the woodcarvings of this period, which would have led to the coining of the term *tarkhan-chitere*, or painter-carpenters.

However, the painter must have certainly enjoyed a higher status among his associates and equivalent craftsmen. Logically, his regular visits to the royal palace to record portraits of the Rajas and the nobility would have made him a person of certain significance among the weavers, tinkers, and jewellers. Correspondingly, following the mid-17th seventeenth century, painting emerges as the most popular form of art in the North-Western Himalayas, partly due to its portability, rate of production, cost of manufacture, and easy accessibility; and partly due to its appeal as the latest cultural trend that took a large portion of the region under its sway within a few decades. As a result, the rise of the painting activity resulted in the fall of other practices including sculpture and architecture. The painter, plausibly, remained greatly in demand, and hence, the opportunities that this career promised must have led several craftsmen to familiarise themselves with painting instead, resulting in the influence of painting motifs in their own body of work.

Conclusion

The collaboration of painters, sculptors, metalsmiths, and carpenters resulted in a syncretism of diverse artistic processes, paving the way for multilateral exchange of iconographic and typological materials. The painters took inspiration for iconographies and incorporated decorative motifs from regional culture, while also infusing pre-existing art forms with visual aspects from their own traditions. This constant exchange resulted in the development of an iconographic tradition that binds together the numerous painting styles that were dominant in Chamba for two centuries. The progressive increase in painters' involvement with various mediums also reflects their growing fame and prestige among the other craftsmen of Chamba.

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Notes

- ¹. *Bhuvaneswar Sharma (born 1958), a native of Chamba, has revealed that the hero-stones of his grandparents are kept in his house to this day.*

- ^{2.} Central List of OBCs for the State of Himachal Pradesh <http://ncbc.nic.in/Writereaddata/cl/himachal.pdf>.
- ^{3.} The names of the members of the Manikant painter family as recorded in the Haridwar Bahis appear upper caste, as well as foreign to the vernacular tradition of Chamba.

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