

Cultural Insights From Ceremonial Paintings of Mewar

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Abstract: *Rajput paintings serve as a vital historical resource for understanding medieval history, offering profound insights into the political and cultural life of the Rajput kingdoms. The paintings developed under the patronage of local rulers meticulously document the lives and traditions of the rajas, the Rajput rulers. Mewar, one of the most respected Rajput kingdoms, holds particular significance as it continued to fight the Mughal emperors eventually signing a treaty of friendship with the British East India Company (EIC) in 1818 AD. Colonel James Tod, who served as the EIC's resident agent in Mewar during this time provided detailed observations of the Rajput royals and their customs in his seminal work, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*. His tenure as Political Agent from 1818 to 1823 AD allowed him to closely witness and document Rajput traditions and governance in a period marked by political change. This paper specifically examines Holi, Gangaur, Chaitra and the Ragamala paintings from Mewar that depict the season of Vasant (spring). The paintings reveal that despite the political uncertainties of the time, Rajput traditions remained vibrant and were actively practiced. Moreover, the artworks with traces of Mughal elements, reveal how Rajput royals used these communal festivals to engage and connect with their subjects, reinforcing social bonds and royal authority. Medieval Rajput paintings are indispensable for scholars as they capture the social and political life of the Rajputs warranting further scholarly attention.*

Keywords: *Chaitra, Gangaur, Holi, Ceremonial Paintings, Mewar, Vasant etc.*

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*Sakal ban Phool rahi sarso,
Umbva phutay, tesu phulay, koyal bolay daar daar,
Aur gori karat singaar,
Malaniyan gadhwa lay aayin karson,
Sakal bun phool rahi*

A poem by Amir Khusrow, a fourteenth century Indo Persian poet, conjures up the season of *vasant* or spring, a theme prominently featured throughout the Indian subcontinent in art and

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sculpture. Spring is portrayed as a celebration of fertility, love, creativity, and spiritual vitality. Temple friezes, literary works like Kalidasa's *Ritusamhara* and even architectural spaces echo the vibrancy and renewal of Vasant. Artists repeatedly drew upon the beauty of Vasant to evoke the spirit of new beginnings, with lush landscapes, blossoming trees, playful animals, and amorous. The persistent artistic engagement of spring with its associated symbols became an enduring theme in Indian medieval art.

Rajput Painting

Rajput painting, an artistic tradition associated with the princely states of North India constitutes an important cultural and historical resource. Rooted in the manuscript tradition, the paintings produced under the Rajput patronage between the 16th – 19th century have distinct Hindu thematic content, and formal aesthetics.¹ Politics and courtly traditions shaped their development, incorporating regional narratives, religious practices, and artistic conventions.

The art tradition spread with political expansion and evolved. By the twelfth century, under Islamic influence, Hindu artists began borrowing Persian elements, blending painting techniques seen in palm manuscripts, textiles and on walls onto paper. These artistic reflections on paper offer insights into the cultural life of the Rajput.

In this paper, I analyze the paintings from Mewar with a focus on the spring festivals. To trace the cultural and political significance embedded in these artworks I draw extensively on the *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* by Colonel James Tod the first Political Agent of the East India Company (EIC). Stationed at Udaipur in Mewar, Tod was in a unique position to closely observe and interact with the Rajput royals. According to British art historian, Andrew Topsfield, in addition to the court historian Shyamaldas, the only other person allowed access to the extensive royal library of portraits and genealogies was Colonel Tod.² While at Udaipur, Colonel Tod travelled extensively in Rajwara or Rajputana documenting its history and traditions.

Spring or Vasant

The spring season, known as *Vasant*, corresponds to the Hindu months of *Chaitra* and *Vaishakha*. Unlike the Gregorian calendar that begins in January, the Hindu lunar calendar, based on the phases of the moon, starts in March with *Chaitra* (March–April) and concludes with

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Phalgun. Across the Indian subcontinent, the season is celebrated with great enthusiasm and goes by various names like *Baishaki* in Punjab, *Bihu* in Assam, *Vishu* in Kerala, and *Chaitra Padwa* in Maharashtra, marking a time of joyous festivity and renewal.

Amongst the Rajputs, the vibrant festival of Vasant is traditionally associated with the Lord Shiva, his devoted consort Gauri, and Krishna. Shiva, worshipped as Eklinga, in Rajasthan, serves as the tutelary deity of the Rajputs. It is believed that the Eklinga temple, situated on a hill near Udaipur, was constructed in the eighth century by Bappa Rawal, founder of the Guhilot dynasty that ruled Mewar. Acting as its diwans or chief servants, the Ranas of Mewar are the honorary high priests of the temple.

Krishna, the cherished Lord of Mathura is a favored deity among Rajput warriors. He is frequently portrayed in *Ragamala* and Krishna Lila paintings as an embodiment of divine love and joyous renewal. In Nathdwara, located northeast of Udaipur, worship of Krishna venerated as Srinathji began in the seventeenth century when Raj Singh of Mewar transported the idol of Krishna from Mathura to Nathdwara to protect it from possible destruction by the Mughals, who threatened to destroy the Hindu temples along the Yamuna River.³ As described by travelers to the region, the temple received rich donations from the merchant. From the banks of the Indus to the mouths of the Ganges, from the coasts of the Peninsula to the shores of the Red Sea, the gifts of gratitude or of fear are lavishly poured to the temple.⁴

Raga Vasant of the *Ragamala* series artistically represents the season. The celebrated *Ragamala* series, a unique audio-visual tradition that artistically represents the twelve Hindustani musical ragas and their associated families, were commissioned by royal patrons. These paintings are characterized by vibrant hues of red and yellow, colors traditionally associated with the vitality and renewal of springtime. The imagery often centers around the divine romance of Krishna and Radha set amidst lush gardens ablaze with blossoming flowers, accompanied by the elegant presence of peacocks, a motif symbolizing beauty and grace. This recurring theme is also seen in Desi, Devagiri, Vairati, Todi, Lalita, and Hindola ragas - variations of Vasant Raga which not only highlight the physical fertility and exuberance of the season but also carries profound allegorical significance, embodying the unity of the divine and the human soul.

The visual narratives extend to scenes depicting women swinging joyfully beneath flowering trees, lovers engaged in intimate conversation beside lotus-filled ponds, peacocks,

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women holding flower garlands and lively village festivities that evoke a sense of communal harmony and celebration. These depictions serve multiple layers of meaning. While they are suggestive of the outward portrayal of spring's fecundity, they blend seamlessly with spiritual themes of divine union, representing the blossoming of the soul and the awakening of love and devotion. The aesthetic and emotive qualities of the *Ragamala* paintings translate the musical essence of the Raga into a visual language. Colors are used to convey natural symbolism evoking specific moods and sentiments that reflect both earthly joy and spiritual transcendence. For instance, in Fig 1, the lady carrying a vase of flowers is wearing a yellow dress symbolic of spring.

Thus, paintings serve as an artistic representation symbolic of the seasonal, and cultural dimensions of spring. Spring festivals - Holi, Gangaur and Chaitra offer rich insights into the intertwined nature of music, art, poetry, and spirituality within the Indian classical tradition.

Fig 1 – Vasant Raga



Source: by author

Boar Hunt - the commencement of Spring

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Spring festivities commenced with the *muhurat ka shikar* called *Aheria* or the boar hunt.⁵ The boar, symbolic of the demon, was hunted as a sacrifice to please Gauri, the wife of Lord Shiva. The Salumbre chief, an ally of Mewar, was invited as the distinguished guest of the spring hunt.⁶ On horses with lances in their hands, the Rana along with his nobles, hunted the wild boar. A painting at the MET museum, New York, US depicts the Rana on horse hunting the boar which is then prepared by the royal kitchen. Colonel Tod writes that the royal kitchen moved along with the hunting team on this occasion, and in some chosen spot the repast is prepared which was partaken by all, for the hog is the favorite food of the Rajput. The delicacy was then served to the hunting party.⁷

Holi

Holi celebrates the victory of good over evil. The ritual of Holika Dahan, or the lighting of bonfires, commemorates the devotion of Prahlad to Lord Vishnu and the defeat of Holika, the demon sister of the tyrant king Hiranyakashyapu, who was burned in the fire while trying to kill Prahlad who was unharmed by the raging fire. The event symbolizes the triumph of righteousness and faith over evil forces.

An 18th-century Rajput painting (Fig 2 – Holi), set against backdrop of Udaipur City palace, depicts Bhim Singh (1778 – 1828 AD), the rana of Mewar, playing Holi in the company of his nobles. Royal symbols like the golden halo or nimbus and aigrette, identify the Rana who is seen throwing the red abhira cannonballs while holding the reigns of his steed in his right hand. The dynamic outdoor scene features nobles on horseback entering and exiting through the Tripoli gates while onlookers are watching the merriment. Musicians, seen in the bottom left corner of the painting, enthusiastically playing drums and trumpets further amplifies the joyful spirit of the celebration capturing the integral role of music in the Rajput festivals.

*But the most brilliant sight is the playing of the Holi on horseback, on the terrace in front of the palace. Each chief who chooses to join has a plentiful supply of missiles, formed of thin plates of mica or talc, enclosing this crimson powder, called abira, which with the most graceful and dextrous horsemanship they dart at each other, pursuing, caprioling, and jesting writes Col Tod.*⁸

Following the revelry, a formal Darbar was convened, where nobles paid respects to the Maharana, who honored them with *Khanada nariyal* or sword and coconut, a practice

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reminiscent of the Navroz, where the Mughal emperor presented clothes to his nobles.⁹ Attending these festivities was crucial to show loyalty as absence implied disrespect to the sovereign.

Fig 2 – Holi Celebration



Source: by author

The popular tradition of smearing of colors stems from the legend of Krishna, who, worried that his dark skin might make Radha, his lover, reluctant to accept him, playfully applied color to her face to equalize their complexions and express his love. Krishna is often featured, in Rajput paintings, playing Holi with the gopis. Additionally, artworks portray Mughal emperors such as Jahangir and Shah Jahan playing Holi suggesting that the Rajput custom was embraced by the later Mughal emperors.

Gangaur

Gangaur, another spring festival, celebrates the union of Shiva or ‘Gan’ with Gauri and is symbolic of conjugal and marital bliss, divine union, and fidelity. As part of tradition, women bring home soil from the surrounding area and plant barley in it. Each household worships the idol of Gauri who is symbolic Annapura – the giver or source of life. On the last day, the idol is immersed amidst pomp and splendor when a procession commences from the Eklinga temple, abode of Shiva and Gauri located on the hill, towards the lake. *At length the procession is seen winding down the steep, and in the midst, borne on a pat, or throne, gorgeously arrayed in yellow robes, and blazing with ‘barbaric pearl and gold,’ the goddess appears; on either side the*

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*two beauties wave the silver chamara over her head, while the more favoured damsels act as harbingers, preceding her with wands of silver: the whole chanting hymns*¹⁰ describes Colonel Tod who witnessed the festivities seen in the painting (Fig 3). Packed with spectators gathered to watch the approaching procession, the painting is action packed. Women, central to the theme, are seen worshiping the idol, against the backdrop of the ghats, singing songs, paying their obeisance to the Goddess after which the idol will be immersed in the lake.

In the lower half of the painting,

*On her [procession of Gauri] approach, the Rana, his chiefs and ministers rise and remain standing till the goddess is seated on her throne close to the water's edge, when all bow, and the prince and court take their seats in the boats. The females then form a circle around the goddess, unite hands, and with a measured step and various graceful inclinations of the body, keeping time by beating the palms at particular cadences, move round the image singing hymns, some in honour of the goddess of abundance, others on love and chivalry.*¹¹

The Maharaja seated in the royal barge, enjoys the boat ride, along with his sixteen thakors.¹² The golden halo, chattri and the royal sun symbol the parasol help identify the painting as that of Bhim Singh. Jagmandir and Jagniwas are seen in the background. The painting is brought to life by the crocodiles, fishes, and ducks illustrated in the lake blooming with lotuses.

Fig 3 – Gangaur painting



Source: by author

Honoring the Bedla chief – a Chaitra Custom

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According to Colonel Tod, on the third day of Chaitra, it was customary for the Rana to honor the Chauhans of Bedla for their military support during war. As illustrated in the painting (Fig 3), the maharana with his royal entourage consisting of decorated bullock carts, camels and elephants welcomes the Bedla chief at the Ganesh Deori accompanying him to the royal palace.¹³ The tradition dated from 1569 AD when the ancestors of the Bedal aided Mewar at the Battle of Haldighat. The Bedla chief, identified by the red dress and the lance symbol on the flag, leads the procession.¹⁴ The fly or chamar bearer next to him are suggestive of his authority. Thakors who proudly bear the crimson flags of Mewar adorned with the golden sun emblem, follow the Bedla chief as a mark of respect.¹⁵ In the background women are seen enjoying the swing near the Ganesh deori. Some are seen carrying the Kejri plant, a symbol of Chaitra, on their heads. Men are wearing white jama and salwar.

The tradition of honoring the Rajput clans was a strategically important practice ensuring continued military support to Mewar during challenging times. Furthermore, the symbols displayed on the flag communicated the hierarchy and status within the Rajput clans. The Sun emblem of Mewar was positioned closest to the flagstaff followed by the moon and lance symbol. An interesting inclusion of an English man in a hat and moustache facing the opposite direction is seen in the crowd, may be suggestive of the changing political scenario.

Fig 3 – Chaitra custom of honoring the Bedla chief painting



Source: by author

Significance of Spring Paintings

Festivals in India are associated with the two crop cycles – Kharif, the summer crop, and Rabi, the winter crop. Mustard and sesame sown in October are harvested around Phalgun or Vasant

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season. The time between the harvest of one crop and the sowing of the other is a time to relax and enjoy after the hectic agricultural activity. Festivals provide the perfect opportunity to unwind, relax and celebrate the produce with the community.

In Rajasthan, like in the Brij region along the banks of the Yamuna, the homeland of Krishna, Holi is celebrated with extraordinary vigor spanning an exuberant forty-day period. The festivities take on myriad forms unique to different towns and villages: Bharatpur and Karauli host the playful and lively *Lathmar* Holi, marked by women gently playfully striking men with sticks in reenactment of mythic tales; while Nathdwara like Vrindavan observes *Phool ki Holi*, a celebration in which fragrant flower petals replace conventional colors. In Jaipur, where the traditional practice of throwing *Gulal Gota*—delicate lac balls filled with vibrant vermilion adds a distinctive flourish to the festivities. This custom has deep historical roots; it began when Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II (1688 – 1743 AD) welcomed lac bangle artisans to settle in Jaipur and tasked them with creating these special balls for Holi celebrations. Being marked by the Rana's *Gulal Gota* was an honor, and the practice quickly spread to other Rajput states, enriching the region's festive culture and artistry.¹⁶ In Madhya Pradesh, historically the domain of the Holkars, a Rajput kingdom, even today music is an essential element of all celebrations. Across numerous rural communities, people from all castes and backgrounds gather around the bonfire, joining together to perform the *Nagadiya* and *phag*, the traditional spring songs. This communal participation exemplifies both the inclusive spirit and rich musical heritage that mark Holi festivities in this region. Each version of Holi preserves local traditions weaving together history and tradition as seen in Mewar.

The celebration of festivals was essential to keep the community united. Mughal symbols used in the painting convey authority of the Ranas despite their declining fortunes as demonstrated in the Gangaur and Chaitra painting.

Conclusion

Ceremonial paintings, a distinctive genre within Rajput art, primarily focus on the lives of patrons and rulers, serving as visual narratives that highlight the social, cultural, and political dimensions of Rajput society. Spring themed paintings from Mewar illustrating festivals such as Holi, Gangaur and Chaitra demonstrate how the Rajput royalty relished the season's festivities in

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the company of their courtiers in public presence. These scenes of merriment are complemented by depictions of customary practices and rituals, reflecting not only royal enjoyment but also the broader community's participation.

Bhim Singh, the rana of Mewar, is shown partaking in vibrant spring festivals alongside his nobles and the wider community.¹⁷ Despite the financial crisis, Mewar continued to honor its traditions. Colonel Tod observed that the determination to be happy amidst calamity, individual and national, has made the court proverbial in Rajwarra, in the adage '*sath bara aur no tahwar*' that is nine holidays out of seven days.¹⁸ Through these visual narratives, historians gain a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural fabric of Rajput society, highlighting the interweaving of royal authority, religious observance, and communal life.

Notes and References

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² Topsfield, Andrew, Court Paintings at Udaipur: Art Under the Patronage of the Maharanas of Mewar, *Artibus Asiae Supplementum*, Vol. 44, 2002 p 7

³ Tod, James, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, Vol. II. Oxford University Press, 1920, p 609

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 611

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 660

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 661

⁷ The painting of Maharana Sangram Singh Hunting Wild Boar at the MET Museum illustrates the boar hunt with the the hunting party enjoying the kill (Object no 1983.508). Link to the MET painting <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/37914>

⁸ Tod, James, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, Vol. II. Oxford University Press, 1920, p 662

⁹ Tod, James, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, Vol. II. Oxford University Press, 1920, p 663

The painting of Maharana Sangram Singh II celebrating the Spring Festival with his nobles in the Rose Garden in Udaipur in the Victoria and Albert Museum dating to the early 18th century depicts the spring darbar (Object number 2022.73). The inscription on the reverse mentions it as the holi darbar. Link to the painting at the Asian Art Museum <https://searchcollection.asianart.org/objects/23451/maharana-sangram-singh-ii-celebrating-the-spring-festival-wi>

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¹⁷ The paintings bear striking similarity to the paintings mentioned by Topsfield, Andrew, *City Palace Museum, Udaipur: Paintings of Mewar Court Life*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 1990. p 67-69

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