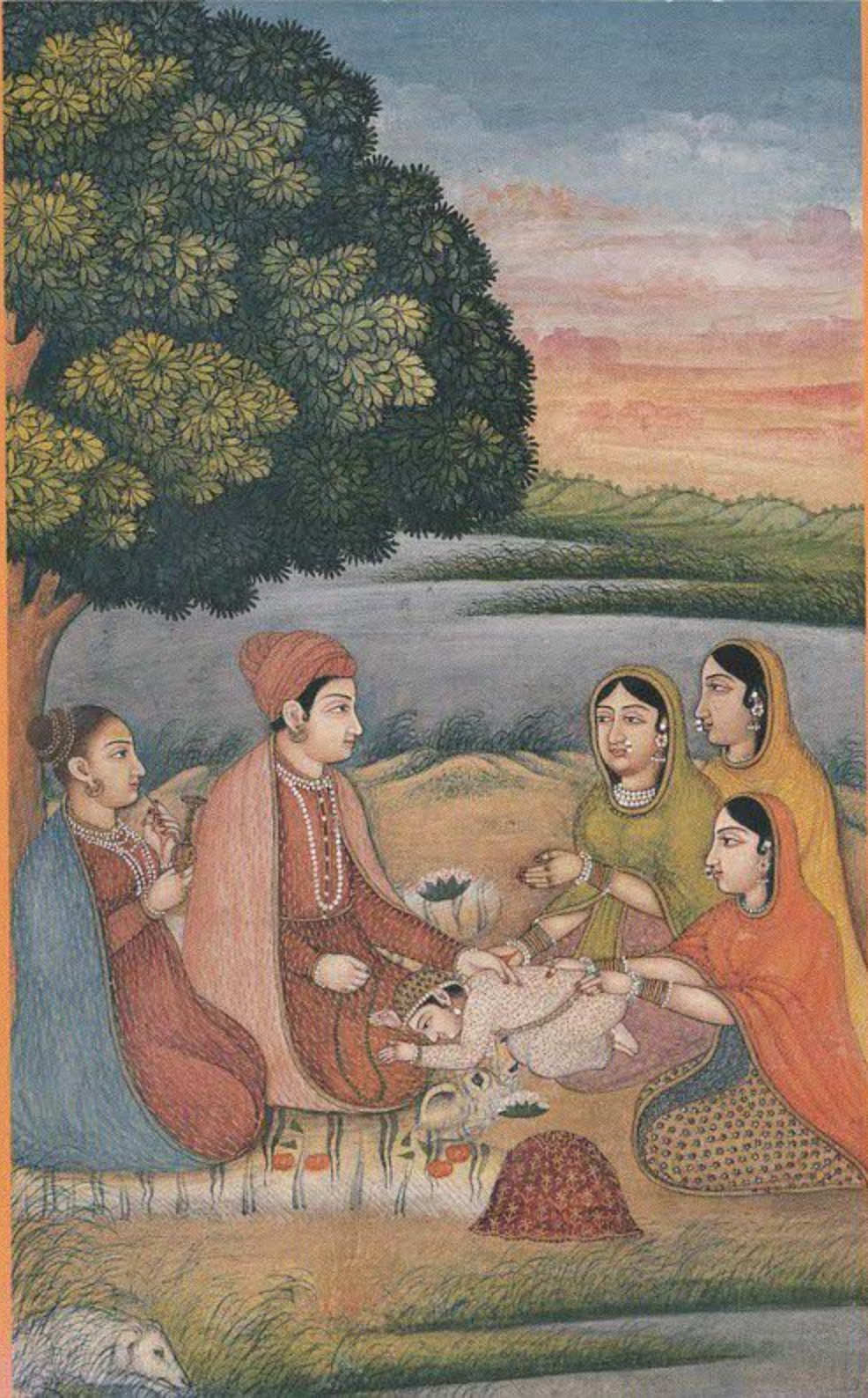


THE OBSERVED AND ENVISIONED



Davis Museum and Cultural Center
Wellesley College

THE OBSERVED AND ENVISIONED:
16TH-19TH CENTURY INDIAN MINIATURE
PAINTINGS OF MUGHAL AND
RAJPUT WOMEN

In the early sixteenth century the Mughals, an Islamic dynasty based in northern India with Central Asian origins, ushered in an age of the most remarkable artistic innovations and cultural synthesis in the history of the subcontinent. However, some parts of the north continued to be ruled by the native Hindu Rajput kings. During this era, miniature painting reached its pinnacle and was shaped to some extent by each court's cultural and religious ideology. This exhibition analyzes the extreme ends of the Rajput and Mughal stylistic and ideological polarities and how each influenced the art of miniature paintings and specifically shaped depictions of women and defined their identities. Many of the paintings in the exhibition are from illustrated manuscripts of poetry, religious writings, or Hindu mythology. These works are often very small but exquisite, tightly packed with rich color, precise brushwork, and luminous gold accents. The sculptures are from sacred Hindu temples.

Mughal artists used the conventions of realism to represent female identity as mortal and earthly. Rajput artists drew on Hindu religious iconography to convey a sense of idealism in the portrayal of the auspicious female as an 'other-worldly' goddess. In contrast with the Mughal works where women are 'realized' as empresses, the Rajput paintings personify women as idealized modes of music suffused with poetic metaphors. Stylistic distinctions among the two ateliers include the Mughal techniques of naturalism, shading, perspective and color gradations and the Rajput's use of bold, lively and primary color fields heavily outlined with multiple perspectives and stylized human physiognomy. The exhibition closes with a look at contemporary work by Pakistani artist Ambreen Butt, who extends the tradition of miniature painting and its focus on female identity into the 21st century.

THE FEMININE IDEAL

Rajput and Mughal courts used painting styles, in a manner akin to the use of a flag or insignia, as a feature that individualized and distinguished them from adjoining princely courts. The human figure, and most prominently the female form, became the hallmark of a state and its ideology. These examples of Mughal and Rajput works capture the feminine 'ideal' for each tradition.

The Hindu River Goddess Ganga and Parvati, two of the most important Hindu goddesses, are shown as bearers of sexuality, beauty, grace and power and are symbolic of all femininity—both mortal and divine—in the present and the future. The goddesses' 'envisioned' physiognomy conforms to the tenth-century Sanskrit treatise of *shilpashastras* that contain standards for proportions and details of 'auspicious' deities; hourglass waist with abundant breasts, arms like palm leaves and lotus petal eyes. Hindu artists were clearly inspired by classical Indian religious and literary works. The artists present personifications of love and heroism in a world where the line between the human and divine is often blurred.

Mughal imperial portraits of women served as instruments for recording observed and accurate details of physiognomy while also documenting the historical alliances of wives to emperors. These portraits of Mughal empresses exhibit aristocratic grace and diplomacy and above all their majestic presence as 'divinity' on earth. These 'psychological' portraits and their heightened sense of individuality are further articulated by Mughal conventions of shading, modeling and perspective. Each empress is 'framed' in architecture typical of the Mughal era which further authenticates their identity, their place in history and their association with the imperial family.

Uma-Maheshvara (Shiva and Parvati)

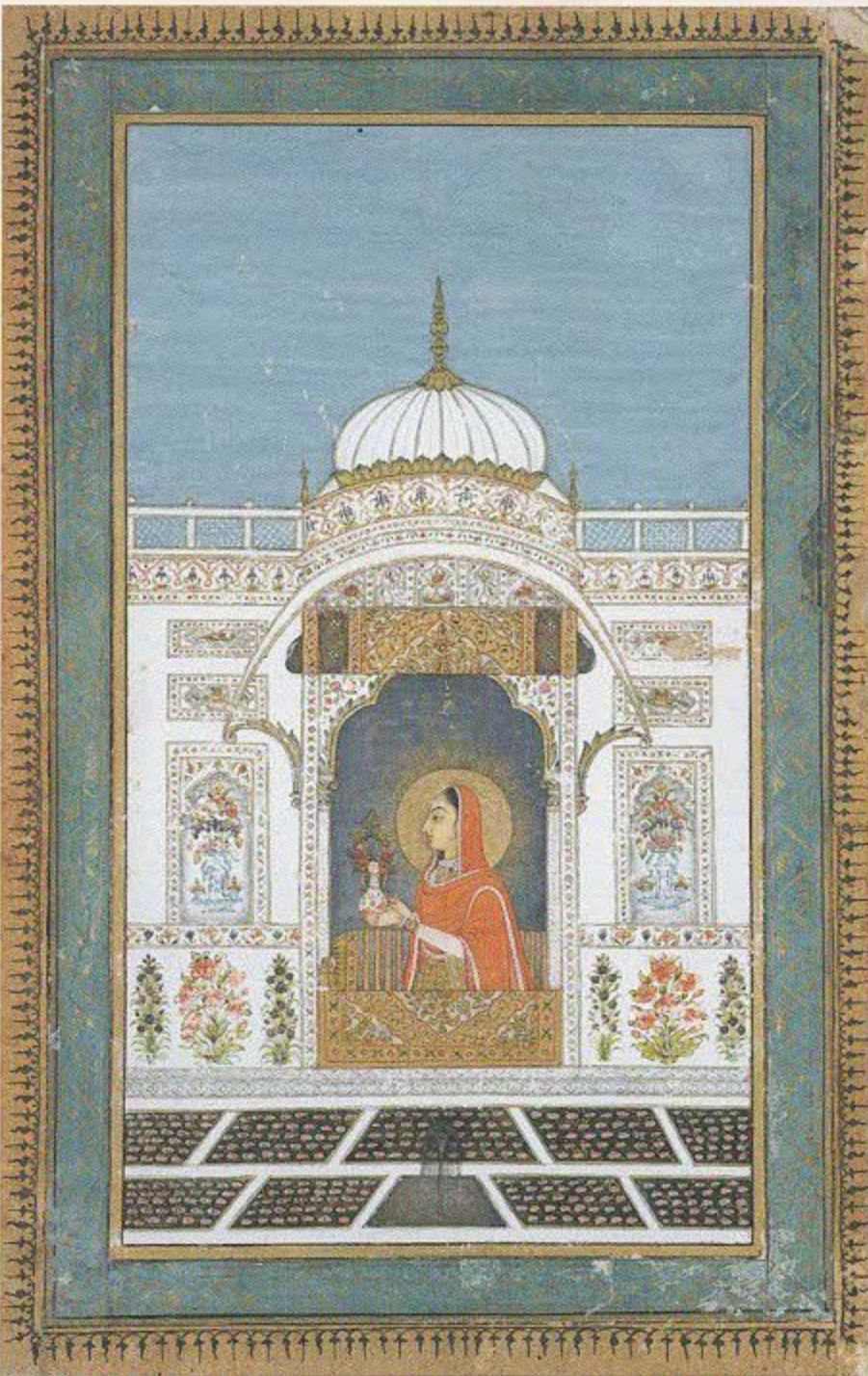
11th century

White sandstone, high-relief

22 x 14-1/2 x 5-3/4 in.

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr.





Left:

Jodha Bai, Mughal Empress

17th century

Polychrome gouache and gold paint on wasli paper

Sheet: 13 3/8 x 8 in.

Gift of Alban G. Widgery to Mead Art Museum,
Amherst College.

Right:

Mumtaz Mahal, wife of Shah Jahan

17th century

Polychrome gouache and gold paint on wasli paper

Sheet 12 x 10 in. (with borders)

Gift of Alban G. Widgery to Mead Art Museum,
Amherst College.

Far right:

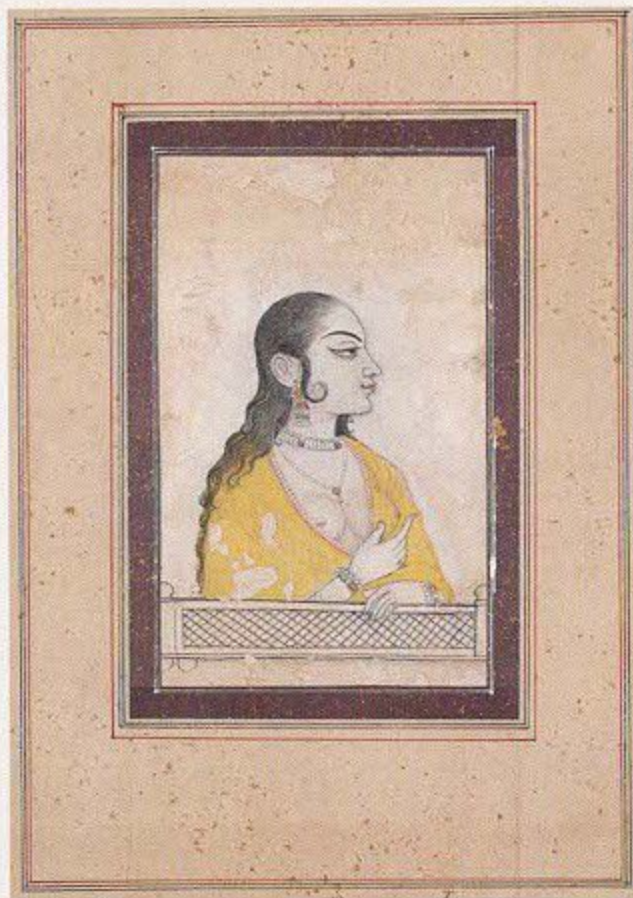
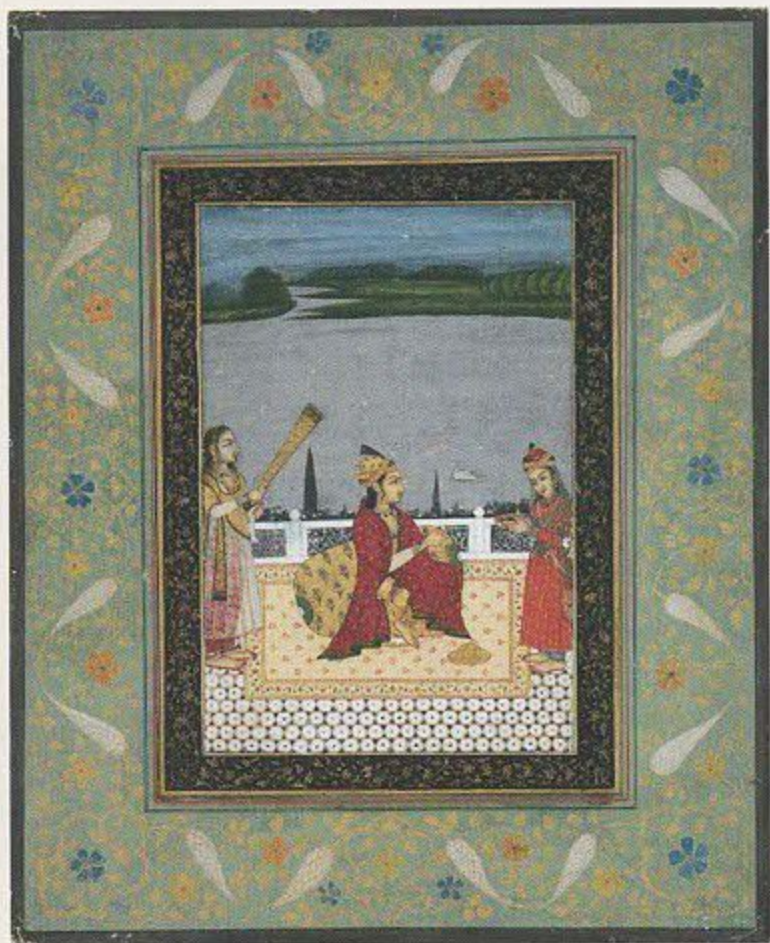
Portrait of Woman at Balcony

Mid 18th century

Polychrome gouache and gold paint on wasli paper
with gold leaf frame

Sheet: 13 3/16 x 7 in.

Gift of George P. Bickford



DIVINE
LOVE REALIZED
AND
DENIED

Rajput and Mughal women serve the narrative traditions in painting as objects of divine and 'ideal' love. The Mughal tradition illustrates the Arab story of *Laila and Majnun*, a tragic love story similar to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The star-crossed lovers, though hopelessly in love are children of rivaling Arab tribal chiefs whose love for each other is denied. Majnun tries unsuccessfully to convince Laila to submit to their love but filial and cultural obligations bar her union with her beloved. Laila bears the brunt of her burning desires for Majnun silently with self control and modesty. These attributes are highly regarded and exalted in Muslim women as indicative of their intellectual and moral fortitude.

The romantic exploits of Radha, a beautiful married cowherd, and the Hindu god Krishna take place in pastoral settings. Radha is transfixed by a passionate obsession for Krishna and rejects her husband and all moral and social codes for her 'Lord'. The allegory is clear: the adoring Radha represents the soul while Krishna is God and together they represent the ecstatic union of man's soul with the Godhead. This transcendental quality is exhibited in this painting where the absence of her 'beloved' or the 'divine' is his presence. Unlike *Laila*, Radha fulfills all of her desires as well as Krishna's in their frolics. This expression and celebration of the full range of emotions are exalted qualities for Hindu females and will ultimately facilitate an enlightened 'union' with divinity.

A *raga*, the classical Indian musical mode, literally means something that colors and imbues the mind with a definite feeling, passion, or emotion. There are six basic 'male' ragas with five 'wives' or *raginis* each, accounting for the total of 36 fundamental modes in North Indian music. In *ragamala* miniature paintings, the subject is a feminine musical mode which suggests longing for the missing lover. The lady holds a *vina* or a musical instrument by an empty bed or in a pastoral setting with her female attendant waiting for her raga 'husband'. This union of the *ragini* with a *raga* will insure a harmonious melody. The idealized luxuriant trees and flower blossoms underline the ripening beauty of the heroine and add an air of lyricism and suspense to the overall mood and the impending 'union'. This

Below:

'Krishna' and 'Radha' Playing Chess in a Pavilion

c. 1750-70

Gouache and gold paint on paper

Sheet: 11 1/8 x 8 1/2 in.

Gift of George P. Bickford

Right:

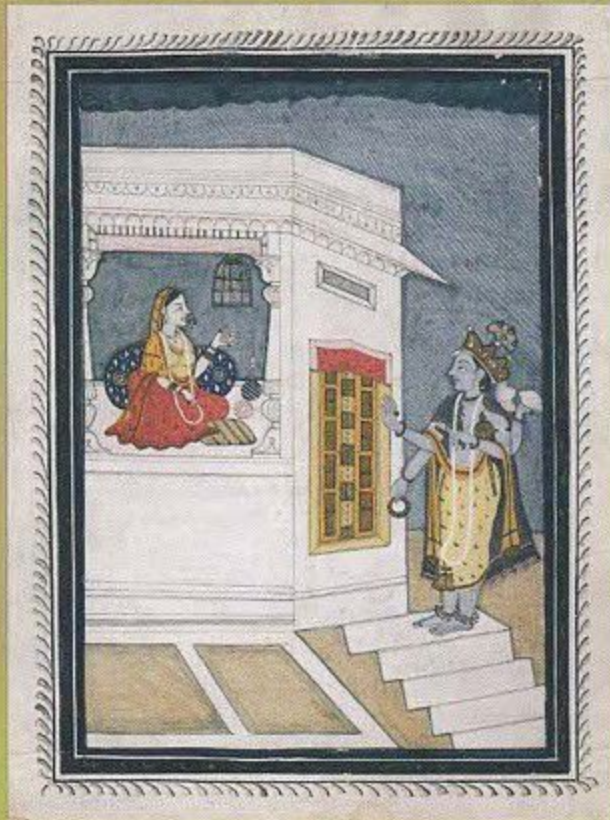
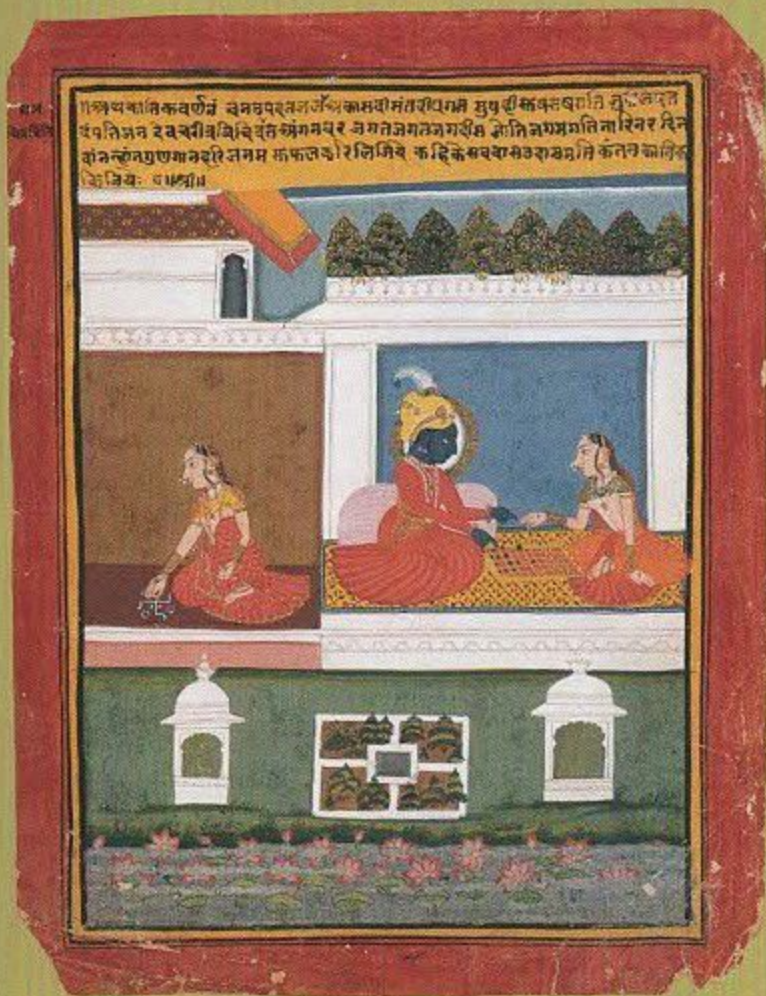
Radha Awaits Krishna's Arrival

19th century

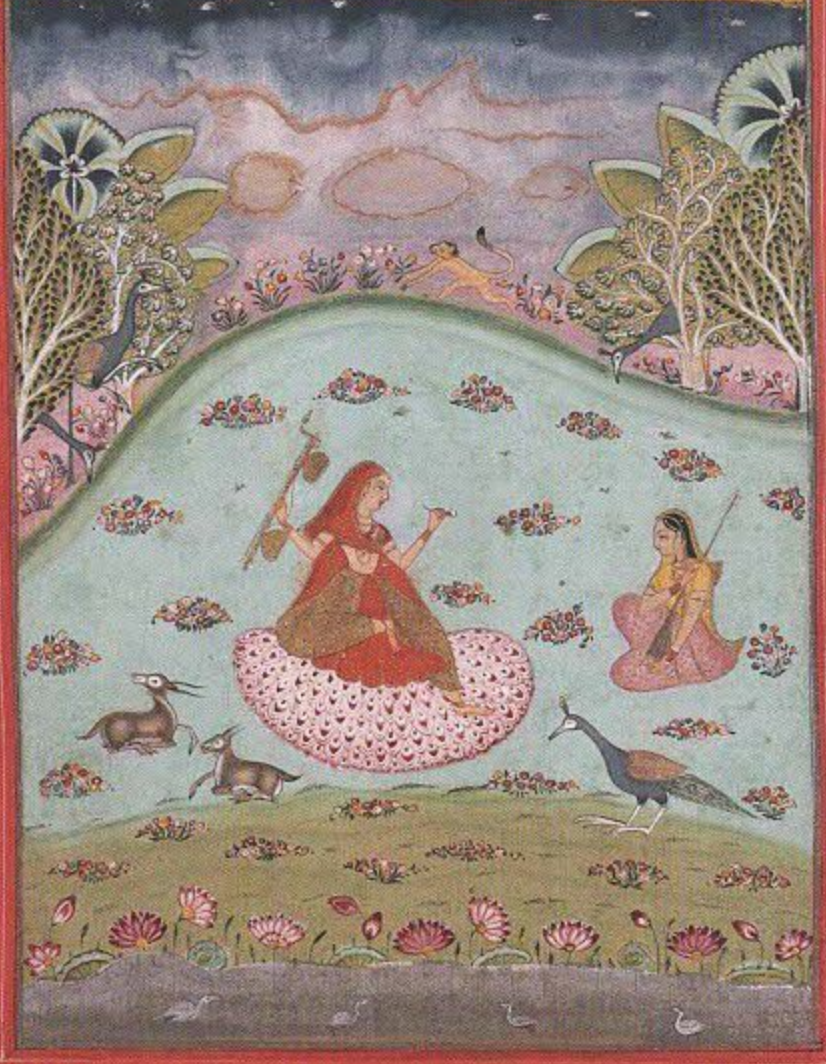
Gouache and metallic paint on paper

Sheet: 10 1/4 x 7 11/16 in.

Anonymous gift



रगनी गौड करी ॥ २७ ॥ चोपडा ॥ गौड करी को । क भि लिंग सु कु वारिः अगम पीय सने ह मन
 धारीः हात कार न ई क आगे बे गीः कर न वा त जा नु म न से प लीः ॥ स मी और डी करि व ज द
 जतिः आ नं दे उ तं गी म भु र सु र गा वैः पी अ आ न न क वा त ज द सु ए पीः त न फु ली और
 आ नं दे घ ए पीः व स न अ नु प रं ग ली येः चित व त मा गु च तुर डी क मी ॥ दो हा ॥ गौ ड का मि
 ए पी का म ए बीः व ति स्था अ ति अ नु कु लः पी य अ ग म न (प्र जा नि के) त थि त न कु फु लः ॥ २७ ॥



Left:

Lady and Attendant in Forest with Animals

18th century

Black ink and brush, polychrome gouache, gold pigment
on wasli paper

Sheet: 13 x 9 7/8 in.

Mount: 12 x 8 13/16 in.

Bequest of Gertrude E. Underhill (Class of 1898)

Below:

Ladies with Ascetic

Mughal period, ca 1790

Gouache and gold paint

Sheet: 8 7/8 x 5 3/8 in.

Gift of Mrs. Tolvo Laminan (Margaret Chamberlin,

Class of 1929) in honor of Class of 1898

Right:

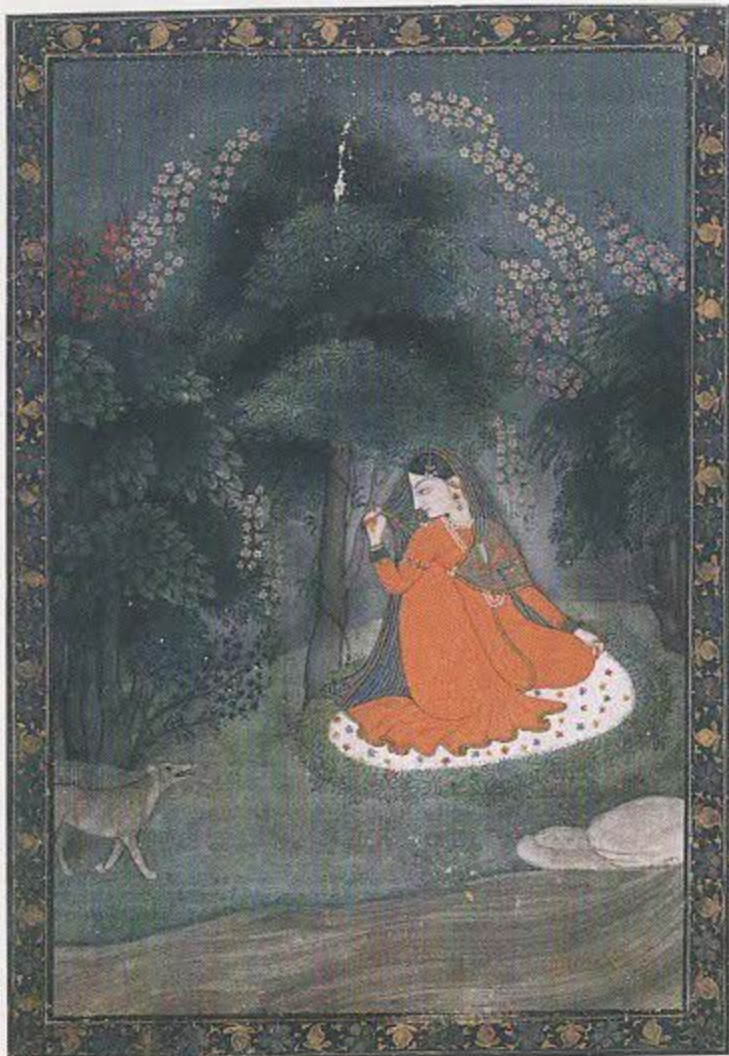
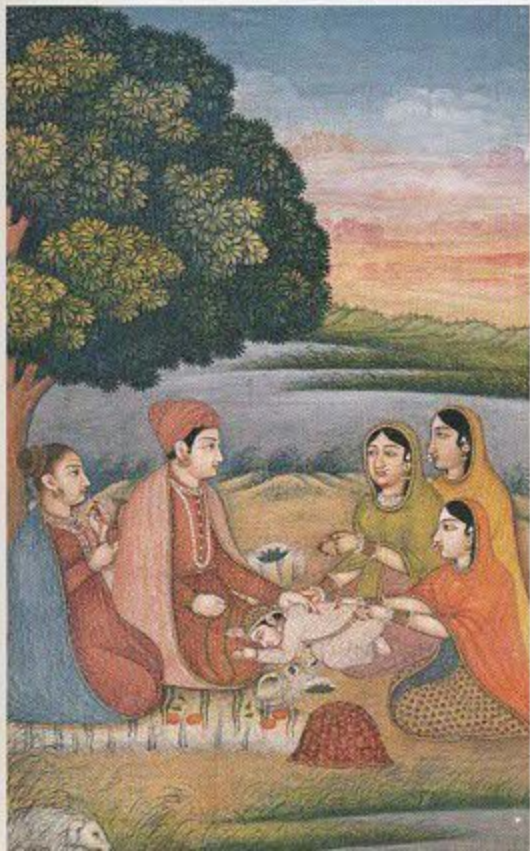
Heroine Waiting for Her Lover

18th–19th century

Polychrome gouache and gold paint on wasli paper with
speckled gold leaf on frame

Sheet: 10 15/16 x 8 1/16 in.

Bequest of Gertrude E. Underhill (Class of 1898)



ragamala style of painting is marked by a stark simplicity. Its spaces are defined by planes of vivid and muted red, yellow, green and black. Colors were also used to represent specific musical notes and the mood of the heroine ragini.

The contrast between the western classical and the Indian ideal (both Rajput and Mughal) is perhaps best demonstrated in their notions of the blended 'unisex' image and identity particularly in the portraits of the emperors. Among the Hindu pantheon the androgynous image of Siva is confidently represented and characteristics of both female and male are highlighted. Gender differences are expressed by personal ornaments to visualize the cosmic perfection of the deity. The Mughal and Rajput emperors codified their personal rule through court rituals, etiquette and refinement in dress. The magnificent wealth within each court was displayed on the emperor's person. Articles of personal attire included lavish jewelry with semi-precious gems, elaborate brocaded sashes and turbans and robes of diaphanous material. These 'feminized' imperials often took fashion leads from the ladies of their *zenana* or harem. Appropriating representational female identities, the emperors were all things to all people of their kingdom and beyond.

FEMALE IDENTITY RECLAIMED

The exhibition closes with a look at contemporary work by Pakistani artist Ambreen Butt whose work extends the tradition of miniature painting and its focus on female identity into the 21st century. Ambreen brings her female figures and their genre into the realm of contemporary art by situating them within a personal context and instilling them with cultural observations under the gaze of a female artist. Her women are neither idealized or realized but present critical paradigms. Butt's paintings also convey the stylistic dynamics in the confluence of Hindu and Muslim ideologies as her female figures are brought into a contemporary cultural and political context where the issues of body politics are also reconsidered and 'reclaimed' by the female artist.



Above:
Maharajah Amar Singh
1650-1700
Black ink and brush, watercolor and gold pigment
Sheet: 8 1/2 x 4 11/16 in.; mount: 9 1/4 x 5 1/2 in.
Gift of Mrs. Toivo Laminan (Margaret Chamberlin, Class of 1929)
in honor of Class of 1898



Right:
Royal Portrait of Mughal Emperor
ca. 1540
Gouache, ink and gold on paper
Sheet: 8 11/16 x 4 1/2 in.; mount: 8 3/4 x 13 1/4
Gift of Mrs. Toivo Laminan (Margaret Chamberlin, Class of 1929)

Capture and Taming of a Wild Elephant

18th century

Black ink and brush, polychrome gouache, gold pigment on wasli paper

Sheet, 6 x 10 in.

Gift of George P. Bickford

