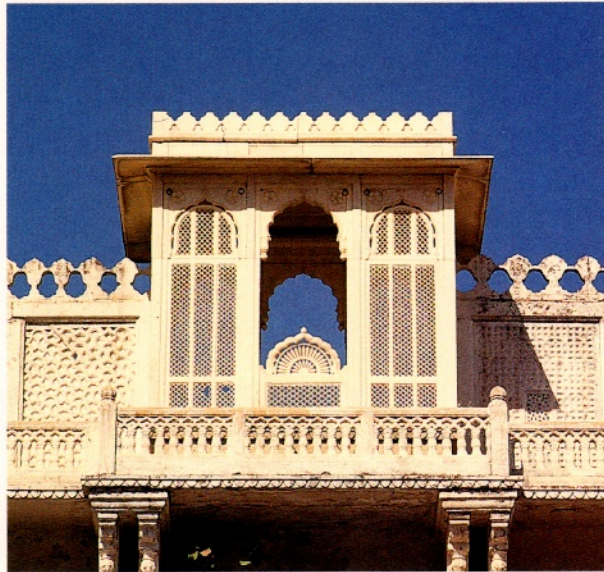


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THE ROYAL MURALS OF RAJASTHAN

Art in Peril



JOACHIM BAUTZE

The *chitrashala* was the private art gallery of the cultivated and wealthy Rajput noble, in which a series of self-contained scenes were painted directly onto the walls. Splendid examples survive from the early seventeenth century onwards, among them those of the Kotah Palace in Rajasthan. Concealed in the innermost recesses of the palace, these and many similar galleries have remained almost unknown in the West, but are now rapidly disappearing as neglect and vandalism take their toll.





3. *Kotah Palace from the west.*

Art historians distinguish between two very different types of painting in the Indian artistic tradition: murals and manuscript illumination. While paintings in the Buddhist caves at Ajanta in Maharashtra State show that the mural attained a high point as early as the first century of the Christian era, for climatic reasons illustrated manuscripts have not survived from any period prior to around 1000 AD. The earliest of these manuscripts are on palm leaf: paper was not introduced into India before the end of the fourteenth century. In addition, a few paintings on cotton, mostly sponsored by Jains, have come down to us from the fifteenth century onwards, but unlike paintings in the West these were neither mounted in a wooden frame nor hung on the wall.

4. *Interior of the chitrashala in the Jhala ki Haveli, Kotah Palace.*



1. *Title page: Pavilion, Kotah Palace.*

2. *Previous page: A lovesick lady pining for Krishna, her lover. First floor, eastern room, western wall of the Jhala ki Haveli, Kotah Palace. 78 x 45cm (31" x 18"). Photographed in 1983.*

Some of the largest specimens on cloth are from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, normal practice being to keep them safely rolled in tubes and to display them only on rare occasions for a few privileged visitors.

Whether on wood, textile, palm leaf or paper, paintings need special care and maintenance to survive the rigours of the tropical Indian climate. The ever-present threat of damage caused by insects poses another serious problem; to combat this many Indian miniatures are surrounded by a border of red lac, which reputedly contains an insect-repelling chemical. Paintings executed in gouache on paper were traditionally kept in bundled stacks and were seldom shown. Due to their comparatively small size, they could in any case only be viewed easily by one person at a time.

In the course of time a third genre of painting developed, which served to bridge the gap between the transportable miniature paintings and the fixed wall paintings. It consists of a thematically self-contained wall painting surrounded by a painted frame, placed at eye level and able to be viewed easily by more than one spectator. It should be distinguished from the more familiar type of Indian wall painting which fills large sections or complete walls with sequential illustrations of a particular story. Although the framed wall paintings occasionally illustrate one legend in a sequence of pictures, they generally represent isolated subjects.

There is no Western term for this third type of Indian painting, which I will refer to here as 'tableau-mural'. Rooms containing tableau-murals are referred to in secular Indian literature of the sixteenth century as *chitrashala*, literally, 'picture gallery'. Most were commissioned by Hindus of noble descent, and are consequently to be found in the area known today as Rajasthan, the home of many Rajput princes. They formed an integral part of any Rajput palace under the jurisdiction of a cultured ruler, and should not be confused with the better known and more recent frescoes at Shekhawati in northeastern Rajasthan, which were generally commissioned by wealthy merchants, and painted mainly on the outside of houses. The *chitrashala* enabled the Rajput connoisseur to enjoy his paintings in the same way as his European contemporaries, except that, in contrast to the latter, he could not remove or rearrange the pictures.

Although Rajasthan is by far the most visited area in India, very few tourists are aware of any of these picture galleries. And in spite of the international attention paid to Indian painting in recent years, even the more experienced traveller does not know about them. They have remained unnoticed, hardly mentioned outside the limited context of scientific research. This is perhaps surprising in an age when highly prized artefacts are generally afforded wide publicity through the media of television and illustrated books and journals. It must be remembered, however, that most of the palaces in Rajasthan are still in private hands and are generally inaccessible to the public, and that it is in the private apartments of these palaces that the murals have



5. A Lady entertained by musicians, eastern verandah, eastern wall, southern niche. 90 x 63cm (36" x 25"). Photographed in 1983.

6. Lower part of 5 showing severe damage. Photographed in 1993.



7. Two ladies on a swing, eastern verandah, northern wall, central niche. 86 x 53cm (34" x 21"). Photographed in 1983.



8. Detail of 7, showing destruction of the lefthand side of the mural. Photographed in 1993.



generally survived the ravages of time. A favoured area for the *chitrashala* was in the women's quarters, a part of the palace that is rarely open to the public, even today.

Only a small number of these galleries, like the *chitrashala* of the palace of Bundi, are under the custody of the Archaeological Survey of India. Many others are greatly at risk. The murals discussed here were painted in the Jhala ki Haveli, a fortress-like mansion comprising about eighty rooms forming part of the old *garh* or fortified palace of Kotah, Rajasthan. Also known as the Zalim Singh ki Haveli, it was built for Rajrana Jhala Zalim Singh, referred to as the 'Machiavelli of Rajasthan' by near contemporary historians. Zalim Singh (1740-1823) was the *divan* or chief minister of several Kotah kings and, for a number of years, exercised more power than the official rulers. As well as being the leading statesman of his time, he was also a great art connoisseur.

In about 1780, Zalim Singh ordered two large apartments in his palace to be embellished with tableau-murals. These were set into real niches or painted recesses marked off by

moulded borders. They had ornate frames of glazed tiles painted with stylised floral motifs. Placed at eye level, they measure between 80 and 95 centimetres in height, and between 40 and 70 centimetres in width.

The artistic quality of these murals can be compared to the far better known Rajput miniature paintings. Some are signed, telling us that certain artists worked on both murals and miniatures. A signed fresco also indicates where the named artist worked, thus providing invaluable clues as to the provenance of many famous Rajput miniature paintings, which carry no formal information as to their place of origin.

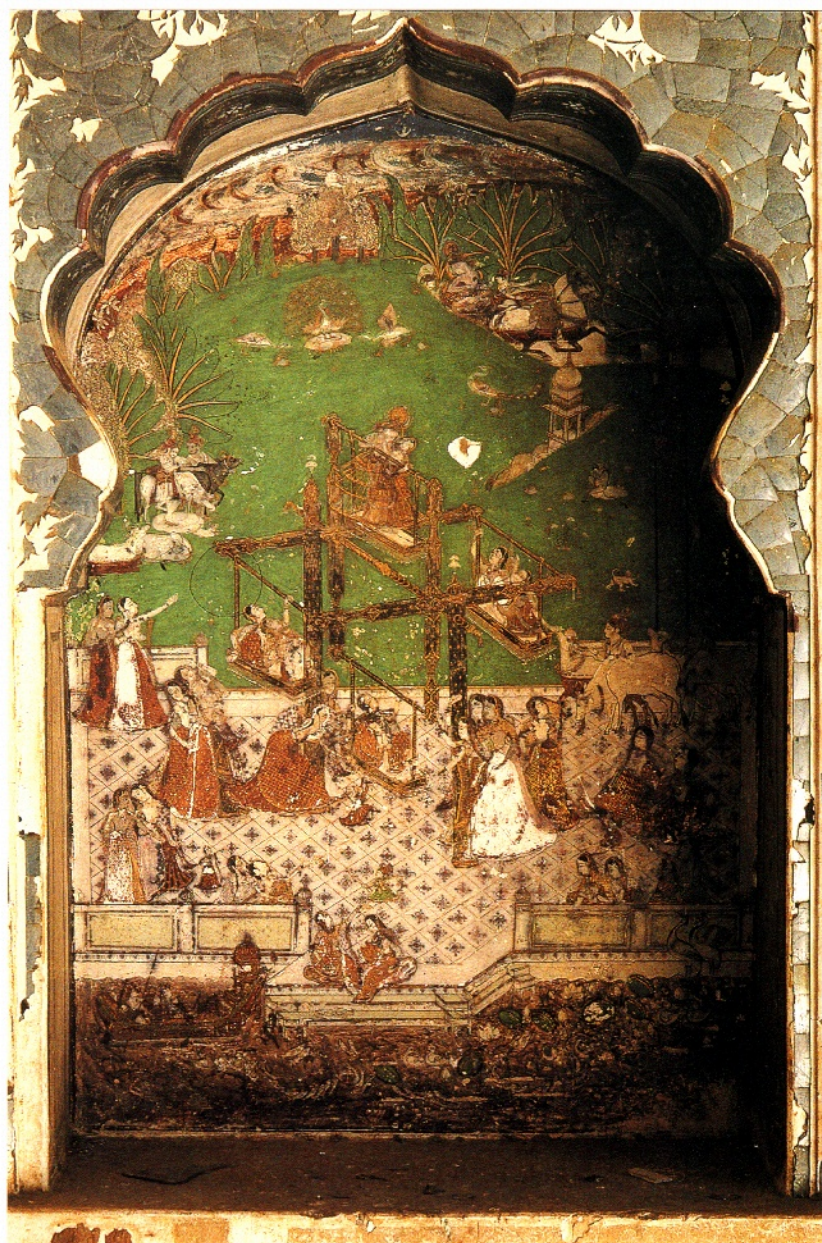
The frescoes were painted using the same watercolours as the miniatures. First, an outline was drawn in red onto the wet plaster. Once the surface had dried the colours were applied and partially enhanced by gold leaf. The binding medium was probably made of gum arabic.

Developed in the second half of the seventeenth century, the Kotah school of painting contributed much to the fame of Rajput art. Kotah style favoured naive attitudes, with figures represented in profile. Artists tended to paint hunting scenes, as well as lyrical subjects showing ladies in various attitudes, as seen in the Jhala ki Haveli paintings. The rulers of Kotah were devout followers of Sri Nathji, a distinctive image of Krishna, who, as one of Vishnu's avatars, is one of the most important Vaishnavite deities in Northern India. Among the murals originally in the Jhala ki Haveli were the earliest known representations of the 36 festivals dedicated to this god. Following prolonged neglect these have now disappeared entirely and are permanently lost to the art historical record.

In spite of their importance, other frescoes still in the Kotah Palace have, within the last few years, suffered a similar fate. In 1981 and 1983, at the time when I photographed and measured the murals in the Jhala ki Haveli, they were still almost intact, although by 1983 most of the gold leaf had been scratched off. Following this visit they were further vandalised by children of a nearby school who managed to break into the locked premises. Another blow to the gallery was the removal of a large panel representing a hunting scene, which was taken to the National Museum of India in New Delhi after it had been allowed to fall into a considerable state of decay. In 1993 a student of mine, Dr Horst Metzger, returned to Kotah and rephotographed some of the murals found in the eastern verandah, the eastern and the western rooms of the first floor in the Jhala ki Haveli. At that time the degree of destruction demonstrated by these two sets of photographs became apparent.

One of these murals shows a high ranking woman sheltering from the sun's heat in a hut with an awning (5). She is being entertained by two musicians seated outside the hut in addition to four ladies-in-waiting. The later photograph of the same mural shows that its upper part had completely broken away, with only a small section of the lower part still intact but seriously cracked (6).

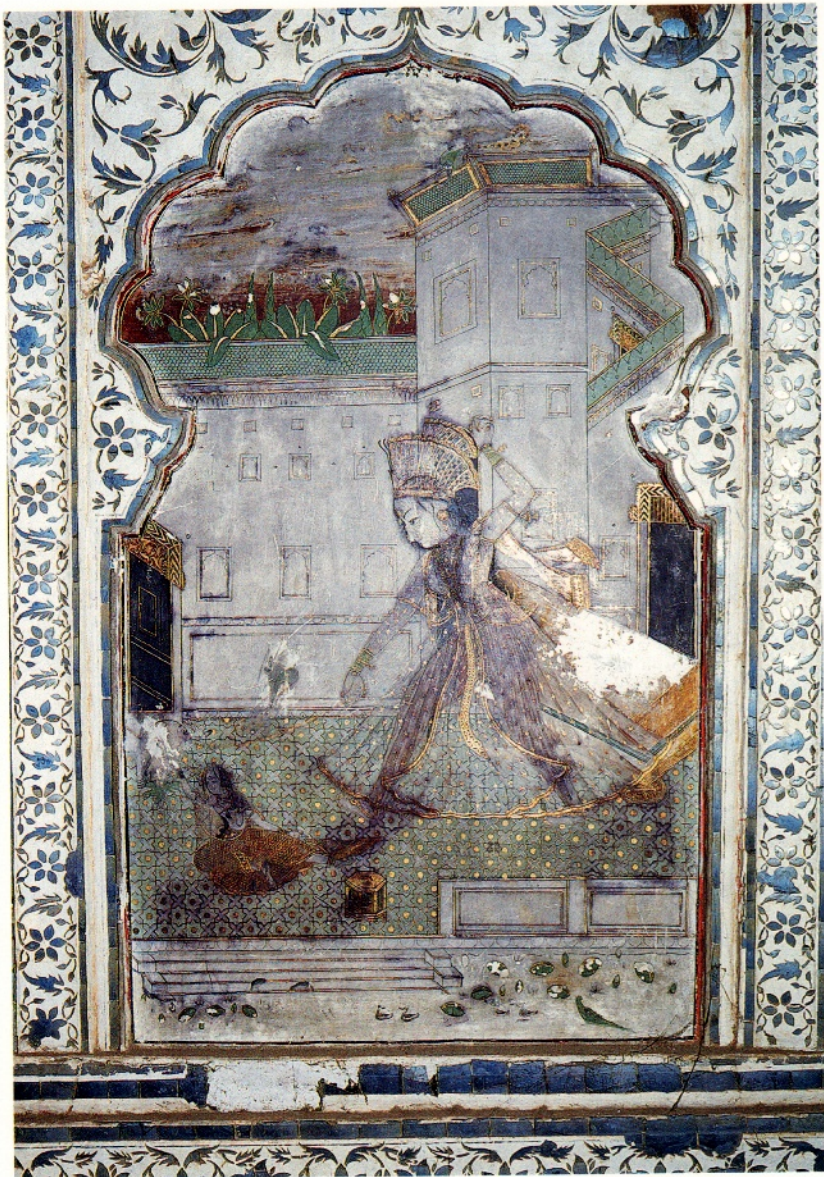
A second example shows two ladies on a swing suspended from the branch of a large tree next to a palace structure (7). Two more ladies witness the scene from below the swing, while another woman embraces the trunk of the tree. An old duenna appears through the door of the palace and points at the swing. A kneeling woman at the bottom of the tree looks distressed. The photograph taken in 1993 reveals that the left half of this mural had by then been completely destroyed (8). A third example shows Krishna carousing with ladies



9. Krishna carousing with ladies on a ferris wheel, eastern verandah, eastern wall, southern extremity. 90 x 56cm (36" x 22"). Photographed in 1983.

10. The above, showing extensive scratching to the surface. Photographed in 1993.





11. Lady rescuing her parrot from a cat, eastern room, eastern wall. 73 x 43cm (28" x 17"). Photographed in 1983.

12. Zalim Singh and Salid Singh on a Lion Hunt (detail), western room, western wall. Photographed in 1983.

number of incised graffiti in Nagari script. Damage to the figure of the woman chasing the cat has mainly been caused once again by the scratching away of the applied gold leaf.

The last example is known only from Kotah miniature painting (13). It is obviously based on a European model, and shows a white-complexioned, blonde-haired figure, probably a girl, picking fruit from some small trees nearby. The artist may have been copying a

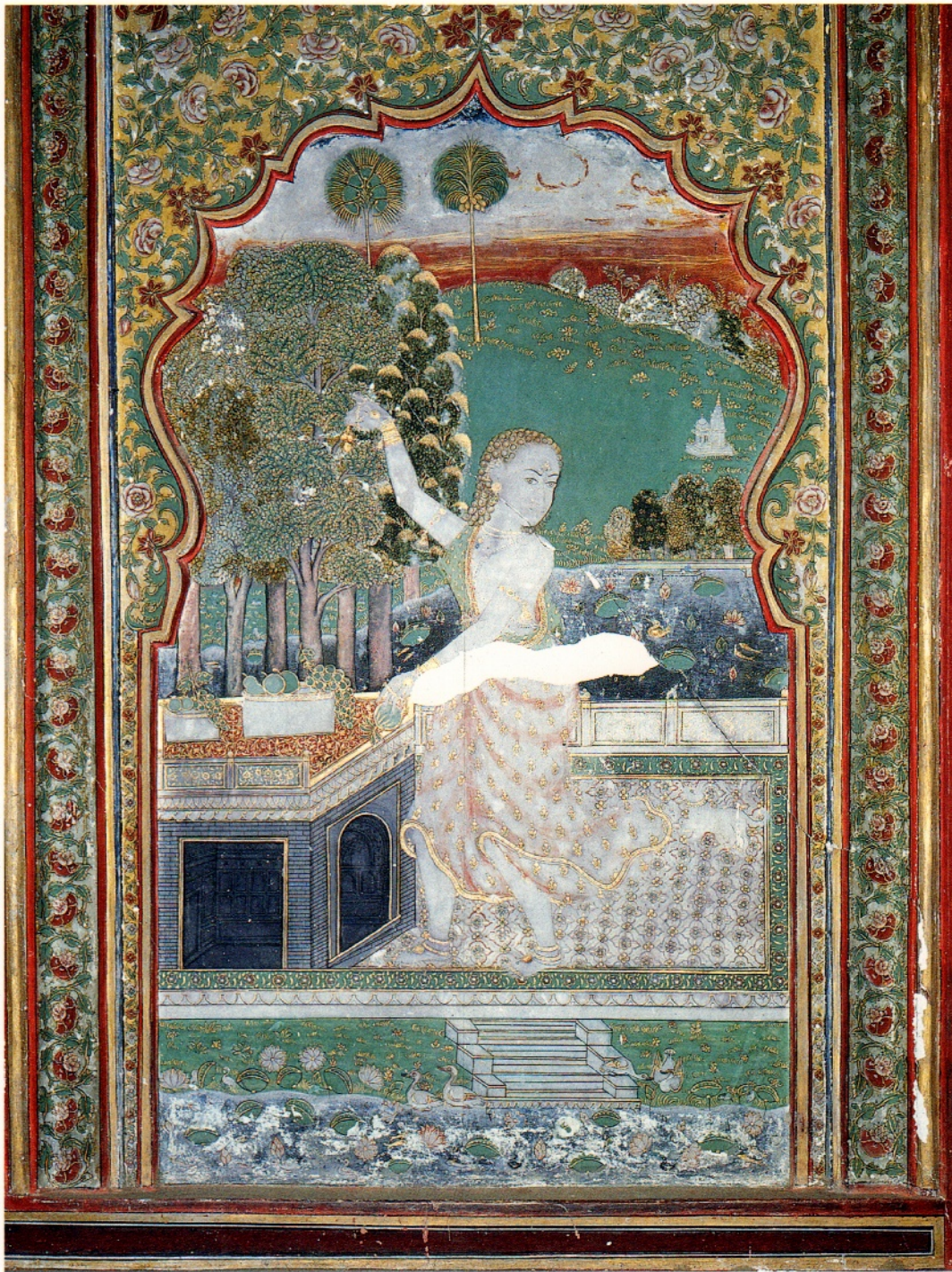


on a Ferris wheel which is kept in motion by several of the god's favourites (9). While in 1983 the mural showed only a negligible loss of the painted plaster to the right of Krishna and his beloved, the 1993 photograph again shows considerable deterioration, with the surface now badly scratched (10).

The earlier photographic record of another example shows a love-sick heroine lying on a bed on a terrace, pining for her divine lover Krishna, who looks down from a palace window apparently unnoticed by the heroine (2). A serving-girl waves a fan above her head, while a duenna resting on a long stick tries to talk to her. This night scene is illuminated by a burning candle and the full moon, the light of which is reflected on the minarets of a mosque, and on the gilded top of the *shikara* (tower) of a Hindu temple set against the dark blue sky on the horizon. A decade later the painted plaster had suffered damage both by repeated blows to the surface and by scratching. Gold leaf originally applied to the two birds, the temple and the mosque had been scratched away. The name Ajay had been scrawled on the painting in white chalk.

The fifth case illustrates a subject which is known from a number of miniature paintings (11). A cat succeeds in opening the cage of a parrot, the pet of a well-to-do woman. The screeches of the threatened bird alarm the woman who rushes on to the scene brandishing a stick in order to drive the cat away. The cat, which has already started mauling the parrot, has to release his injured prey. The 1993 photograph of the same mural reveals a

13. A blonde girl (?) picking fruit, western room, southern wall, eastern niche. 75 x 44cm (29" x 17"). Photographed in 1983.



14. Detail of 13 showing extensive surface damage. Photographed in 1993.



European-inspired Fortuna, without understanding the details. The mural was already partly damaged in 1983 when an area of painted plaster had flaked off. By 1993, however, large areas of the plaster had been damaged (14). In addition, there were signs of recent graffiti and white pigment appeared to have been thrown over the entire wall, leaving extensive streaking.

Similarly damaged galleries can be seen in a number of other palaces in Rajasthan. Indeed, very few are likely to survive. The *chitrashalas* of the Bhao Singhji ki Haveli in Bundi and the Royal palace of Karwar have been converted into police stations with subsequent damage to the murals. In Bundi, they were overpainted with the most gaudy acrylic colours. Even seventeenth century frescoes, like those in the old palace of Indargarh, have been defaced with air-gun pellets.

By the time I returned to the Jhala ki Haveli in October 1995, the frescoes had completely disintegrated. These photographs are therefore the only record that remains of the Kotah Palace gallery. Elsewhere similar murals continue to suffer irreversible damage, during building alterations, for example, when they are frequently overpainted with whitewash or randomly cut into for the insertion of windows. Their neglect arises from a lack of knowledge, funds and interest. One can only hope that the publication of this account of the history and plight of the *chitrashala* may go some way to preventing further destruction.