

CENTRAL INDIAN PAINTINGS

IN THE JAGDISH AND KAMLA MITTAL MUSEUM OF INDIAN ART

John Seyller

Jagdish Mittal



Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art
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28 Raghogarh Chiefs Hunt Rhinoceroses

Raghogarh, c. 1690-1695

Painting 30.3 x 39.8 cm. with red border 33.3 x 42.5 cm

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In a deft creative twist, the artist of the previous military expedition (cat. no. 26) repurposes its compositional framework for a very different kind of scene, subtly disarranging its stately rectangular order to become the underlying structure of a frenzied rhinoceros hunt. The connection is not obvious at first. In both works, the isolated protagonist effectively forms the painting's nucleus, which is then complemented by a thick surround of ancillary figures. In this case, that subject is a dark hulking Indian rhinoceros, at once predator and prey. With three figures below done in already, the male rhino is now getting the better of two more hapless hunters, who have been knocked to the ground and bloodied, their turbans dislodged, their swords shattered. The charging beast tramples one to death and gores the other with its single horn, a fanciful detail of attack.¹ At the same time, the rhino is riddled with arrows and spears, and its thick, latticed brown skin lacerated with sword wounds. The furious assault on the creature continues unabated, so prospects for survival are bleak.

As Kheechi chieftains converge on the beleaguered rhino from three directions, the riders keep to organised columns that slowly take the shape of the large rectangle used before by the same artist. The geometry is certainly more relaxed at points, but it is nonetheless clear from such contrived elements as the two archers filling out the lower right corner, the prone bodies of the horsemen becoming segments of the long horizontal unit below, and especially the uncannily prominent placement of a water hole and another rhinoceros hiding in the bushes in the loose horizontal above the artist has intended to realise a rectangular design all along. The chieftains themselves are animated in pose and expression, their clothing rendered in sophisticated combinations of mango, mauve, and green, and their mounts given to piebald colouring and ornamented manes. The figures are, however, less precisely drawn and detailed than the soldiers under Lal Singh's command in cat. no. 26, so it is conceivable that this painting actually precedes the other by a few months or years.

What makes this delightful Raghogarh work the favourite of many connoisseurs, including Jagdish Mittal, are its many vibrant and whimsical passages. One calf in the herd pokes her head out from a hollow fronted by low trees to glower at the pair of hunters training muskets on her. Four more females raise their heads covered characteristically with wart-like bumps to sniff and snort, providing a refreshing glimpse of the behaviour of these enormous animals in their natural habitat. Extravagantly long grasses pinwheel wildly around pools and trees, and bright flowers explode across the blue-grey landscape.

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1 The Indian rhinoceros, which can weigh up to 3,200 kg, habitually fights with its incisors and not its horn.



