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The Early Royal Murals of Dungarpur, Rajasthan

Dungarpur was the capital of the erstwhile princely state of the same name and is now the headquarter of a district in Rajasthan, India. It lies in 23°51' north latitude and 73°43' east longitude.

The construction of the Juna Mahal (literally: old palace) was started in 1282 AD and formed the nucleus or city palace of the city of Dungarpur. Although this palace marks the foundation of the city and still represents the largest, most ancient and rewarding site of the place, it is ignored by recent official sources (Rajasthan State Gazetteer 1996, 52). The structure is architecturally most rewarding, as it was enlarged over the centuries until it slowly fell into disuse in the mid 1950s. Recently, the architectural history of the palace was fully reconstructed by Dipl. Ing. Klaus Imig of Waldenbuch and Mahesh Purohit of Dungarpur. Mahesh Purohit is the son of the former chief priest of the ruler, who also held the position of the "Controller of Household Valuables". The task of documenting the murals within the Juna Mahal fell on me.

Images of several of these painted premises keep on appearing in more general books on Indian and Rajasthani palaces¹. All of these reproduced wall paintings, however, date from the last quarter of the 19th to the early 20th century. Those murals that I consider to be the earliest figural wall paintings of the Juna Mahal were, to the best of my knowledge, never before adequately reproduced or discussed. Some of these earlier murals were hidden under layers of whitewash, which I got removed only in 1998².

The earliest murals can be found in two different localities of the Juna Mahal. The first is one room, which is situated in the northern part of the western wing on the groundfloor. The second is a sequence of two rooms in the second floor of the eastern wing. The latter locality was later called "Hathiyaron ki Ori" or armoury room.

In none of these localities are contemporary inscriptions allowing us to assign a date to these frescoes. The dating is hence exclusively based on comparison with datable material from outside Dungarpur.

The central part of the southern wall of the southern room of the so-called "Hathiyaron ki Ori" is decorated with a kind of shrine supported by two elephants (fig. 1). The back wall of the recess shows a symmetrically arranged flower made of inlaid cut pieces of glass set against a brick-red wall. What this elaborately painted recess might have once contained is not clear. To the right, this "shrine" is venerated by a person of higher rank, facing left, with his palms joined in front of his chest. A female servant attends behind. Two females above, facing left, with large wings move towards the centre of the composition. The lower part of their bodies is hidden by clouds that resemble rocks or mountains. The left hand part of the composition is dominated by a man facing right. He seems to have held a garland in front of his chest of which, however, no trace now remains. His feet seem to rest on a lotus held by one of the two elephants, the back of which supports the "shrine". An angle-like female above him showers flowers on his head while another winged female facing left is about to throw a flower garland on him. Two female attendants behind the man hold a shield, morchal and handkerchief.

The ruler to the right (fig. 2), closely resembles Bikaneri portraits of Maharaja Karna (also known as: Karan) Singh of Bikaner (born: 1616, died: 1669; cf. Ojha 1939, 229ff.), for which compare S. C. Welch³. Although it is not sure, whether the man shown in fig. 2 really represents Karna Singh of Bikaner – the available books on the history of

¹ Fatesinghrao Gaekwad/Fass 1980, 98ff.; Georges/Lennard 1996, 137, 140ff., 168; von Schaewen/Coleridge 1997; von Schaewen/Sethi 1999, 156ff.

² I am grateful to a former bhogya stri of Maharajkumar Harshvardhan Singhji, son of Maharawal Mahipal Singhji of Dungarpur, for kindly cleaning parts of the premises.

³ Welch 1976, 112, no. 62 (= Desai 1985, 31, no. 28) or Khandalawala/Pramod Chandra/Moti Chandra 1960, 48, no. 85, fig. 66 (= O'Brien 1994, Plate 14, mirror reversed).



Fig. 1. Central part of the southern wall of the southern room of the so called "Hathiyaron ki Ori", Juna Mahal, Dungapur. Photo: J. K. Bautze.



Fig. 2. Detail of fig. 1, showing a ruler who resembles Karna Singh of Bikaner. Photo: J. K. Bautze.

Bikaner and Dungarpur do not mention a Dungarpur queen of Karna Singh – his appearance, style and fashion provides a clue to the date of the mural.

The composition of the mural shown in fig. 1 makes it clear that the man to the left is the more important person, viz. the ruler of Dungarpur, assuming that both rulers once actually met and that the artist commemorated this event in this painting. The long reign of Maharaja Karna Singh, whose rule started in 1631, provides more than one contemporary ruler from Dungarpur, but as the Dungarpur ruler appears in a number of frescoes, it is possible to determine his identity.

The lintel on the northern wall of the same room that contains the murals shown in figs. 1–2 represents a scene of which fig. 3 reproduces a part of the right hand half. A man facing left is shown worshipping the idol of Shri Nathji. As in October 1669 the image of Shri Nathji had to be removed from the large city of Mathura in order to escape its desecration by the army of the Mughal emperor, it is unlikely that this painting with its few huts represents a part of that well-known city. The dark image of Shri Nathji, who is shown with his left arm raised, was re-installed at a shrine specially built for the idol at a place, which became known as Nathdwar, either on February 10th (Jindel 1976, 23) or March 10th, 1672 (Somani 1976, 282)⁴. The painting hence represents the early and modest "haveli" of Shri Nathji in Nathdwar, Mewar, Rajasthan, and the ruler from

⁴ As this date is of great importance, we give here the date according to the Indian calendar, which is the seventh of the dark fortnight of the month phalgun in Vikrama Samvat 1728, cf. Shyamaldas 1886, vol. 2, 453.

Fig. 3. Detail from the mural above the lintel of the northern wall of the same room as fig. 1. Photo: J. K. Bautze.



Fig. 4. Detail of a mural on the ceiling of a room in the northern part of the western wing of the ground floor, Juna Mahal, Dungarpur. Photo: J. K. Bautze.



Dungarpur then is Maharawal Jaswant Singh (ruled 1661–1691; cf. Ojha 1935, 115ff.).

Nathdwar is situated in the former state of Mewar, the ruler of which was very eager to have the important image of Shri Nathji within his own territory. The ruler of Mewar then was Maharana Raj Singh (born: 1629, ruled: 1652–1680) who was personally present when the party with the idol of Shri Nathji entered Mewar on December 5th, 1671 (Somani 1976, 282). Maharawal Jaswant Singh cannot have visited the famous idol of Shri Nathji without consent of the Maharana and historical sources confirm that the Maharawal maintained “cordial relations” (Somani 1976, 280) with Maharana Raj Singh of Mewar. Inscriptional evidence like the “Rajprashasti” mentions them as walking alongside during the inauguration of the large

artificial lake made under and named after Maharana Raj Singh as “Raj Samudra” in 1675–76 (Ojha 1935, 116; Sehgal 1974, 31).

A stylistic feature of almost all larger figures in these early murals is the large eye and the small hands, as exemplified here by figs. 2–3. This feature reappears in the murals of the room in the northern part of the western wing on the ground-floor. Our fig. 4 shows a detail of the ceiling with three female winged musicians and one performing dancer who are part of Indra’s court. The large eye features also in contemporary portraits of Maharana Raj Singh (cf. Topsfield 2002, 111f.), the comparatively small hands, however, are only met with in earlier Mewar paintings, like the Ragamala of 1628 by the artist Sahibdin (Topsfield 2002, 60ff., in particular note 69).



Fig. 5. Mural in the north-eastern corner of the same room as fig. 4. Photo: J. K. Bautze.

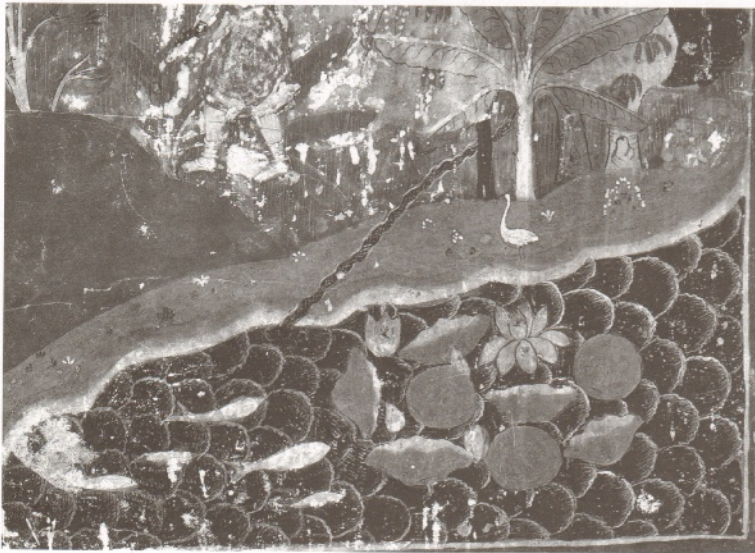


Fig. 6. Detail showing the lower right corner of fig. 5. Photo: J. K. Bautze.

The dominating influence of the royal painting ateliers at Mewar is best demonstrated by a mural in the north-eastern corner in the room of the northern part of the western wing on the ground-floor (fig. 5). This mural illustrates the “Pracchanna

Kama-Abhisarika Nayika”, a verse (32, chapter 7; cf. Keshava-Granthavali 1954, 44) of the “Rasikapriya” by Keshavdas Mishra. As this verse explains the contents of the mural (fig. 5), we quote here one of several existing English translations in full:



Fig. 7. Detail of a miniature from the atelier of the Mewari artist Sahib Din. Private collection, California, USA. Photo: J. K. Bautze.

*“When she made haste her lover to meet
Snakes round her legs entangled were,
And many lay trampled under her feet!
And seeing her speed the demons stared
From all sides; the thick shower of rain,
She heeded not, nor the crickets’ cry,
Nor thunder of clouds: nor yet remained
Aware of ornaments falling aside,
Clothes rent, or thorns her breasts that hurt:
Seeing her the sprites said, ‘Where did you
Oh! Lustful woman learn such love?
This manner of keeping your rendezvous?’”*
(Keshavadasa 1972, 121).

This verse is superscribed on three different Mewari paintings dating from about 1630 – 1640ies. All three miniatures are quite similar in their composition and are heavily indebted to the work of the painter Sahibdin (Topsfield 2002, 60ff. et var. loc.). That the mural presented here by fig. 5 is closely related to these three paintings on paper becomes evident by comparison. All three miniatures are published. One is kept in the Goenka collection, Mumbai (Goswamy/Bhatia 1999, 128, no. 100). The other painting is in the Government Museum, Udaipur, no. 1097.26/142 (Goswamy 1986, 321, no. 301; Franz et al. 1990, 282, bottom left) and the third is part of the collection of Alvin O. Bellak, Philadelphia (Kramrisch 1986, 68, no. 61; Mason et al. 2001, 71, no. 20).

As the three paintings and the mural share almost all features, it is easier to point out the differences. The pair of goblins and the pair of demons in the mural facing the woman on her way is smaller. The tiger was replaced by an elephant

the threatening excitement of which is indicated by its fast movement in the direction of the heroine. The Kanphat yogi identifiable by his earring is not mentioned in the text but appears in all three miniatures and the mural. Only in the Bellak-version and the wallpainting is he placed in a cave situated in the upper right hand part of the composition. The expecting hero (Krishna) of the mural enjoys the attendance of four persons whereas he is left without any attendant in all three miniatures. Only in the example from Philadelphia does Krishna wait in a house, all other examples, including the mural, show him in a kind of hut made of leaves. The waters of the torrents of rain are collected in a lake, which only appears in the mural (fig. 6). It is interesting to compare the way in which the agitation of the water is indicated by a kind of fishskin pattern painted in white and set against a black background. The lotus petals with their red outlines and pointed tips together with the delineation (white on black) of the water reappear in other paintings from Sahibdin’s atelier (cf. fig. 7)⁵.

An isolated 17th century illustration to the Rasikapriya, as offered by figs. 5–6, is comparatively unusual, as it is generally part of a sequence that may involve more than hundred pictures, as demonstrated by several well-known sets on paper.

⁵ Detail from a painting to the Rasikapriya, seen last in the collection of Elvira and Gursharan Sidhu, California. For a reproduction of the full painting see *Two Thousand Years of Indian Art* 1982, 104, no. 97; Ehnborn 1985, 111, no. 48.

This individual illustration to the Rasikapriya in the Juna Mahal seems to support the assumption that there was no earlier tradition of stylistically related painting at Dungarpur and that the illustration of the "Pracchanna Kama-Abhisarika Nayika" was copied outside the context of a locally developed tradition, probably from a hired group of artists which were brought from Mewar, probably at some point during the late 1680ies.

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