

Orchha, Datia, Panna: Miniatures from the
Royal Courts of Bundelkhand (1590–1850)

I

Origins of Orchha Painting

The Eva and Konrad Seitz Collection
in the Museum Rietberg Zurich

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Royal Courts of Bundelkhand (1590–1850)

I

Konrad Seitz

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As Germany's foremost collectors of Indian miniature painting, the retired diplomat Konrad Seitz and his wife Eva Seitz have been friends of the Museum Rietberg for over thirty years. It all began when the then director of the museum, Eberhard Fischer, decided to stage the exhibition *Pahari Masters*. Not only did his research bring the Seitz Collection to his attention, but he was able to borrow some of its wonderful works for that ground-breaking show. The personal friendship between like-minded connoisseurs to which that initial contact gave rise deepened over the years, eventually leading to the acquisition and donation of fifty-nine magnificent Pahari paintings from the Konrad and Eva Seitz Collection by Fischer's successor, Albert Lutz. It was during Lutz's time as director of the Museum Rietberg that first the Pahari and then the collectors' Mughal-era paintings were accorded exhibitions of their own in the Park Villa Rieter.

Three years ago, the Museum Rietberg had the great good fortune to once again be the beneficiary of one of the most important donations of Indian art of recent years: a collection of over 240 miniature paintings from the Bundelkhand royal courts of Orchha, Datia, and Panna, acquired over a period of fifty years by the most knowledgeable and discerning Konrad and Eva Seitz. It fills me with profound gratitude that it has fallen to me to consolidate this unique relationship between the Seitzes and the Museum Rietberg by organizing exhibitions to showcase these exceptional works and publishing this monograph.

The magnitude of the Seitz donation endows our institution with a new focus of unparalleled breadth and depth. The couple's extraordinary patience and persistence as collectors assured them of numerous paintings belonging to much larger series as well as countless single works. Those in the former category are especially valuable to us art historians: they allow us to identify the work of several different workshops and to follow the development of their distinctive styles and motifs over long periods of time. Hence, this gift provides us with our first representative view of the earliest school of Rajput miniature painting.

The miniatures also tell of their erstwhile owners' passion for Indian painting, which was fired by their "discovery" of it in 1968 and has continued undiminished to this day. The German diplomatic service took Konrad and Eva Seitz all over the world: first to India and the United States, and later, as German ambassador, back to India followed by China and Italy. Through their own scholarship and contact with scholars all over the globe, the Seitzes have become highly knowledgeable experts in the painting of the Bundelkhand royal courts. Their approach to the subject combines Western ways of seeing with the concept of *rasa*, which is central to Indian aesthetic theory. It is this diversity of perspectives that sets their collection apart and that makes the works in it so exceptionally important.

Orchha, Datia, Panna: Miniaturen von den rajputischen Höfen Bundelkhands (1580–1820), a lavishly illustrated, two-volume overview of the collection written by Konrad Seitz himself, was published in German in 2015 with the aim of making the collection accessible to a broad readership. Its stylistic analyses and interpretations of the motifs transport readers into the conceptual world of this important tradition and paint a vivid picture of the artistic life of the royal courts of Bundelkhand in the sixteenth to eighteenth century. The miniature paintings themselves, many of them published there for the first time, tell of tradition and innovation as well as the close ties that existed between religion, poetry, and painting. The monograph quickly became a major reference work on the subject.

It is my pleasure to now present the first English edition of this important monograph. The first volume, extensively revised and enlarged by Konrad Seitz himself, introduces the reader to the history and the beginnings of Bundelkhand

painting. Its focus is on the royal court of Orchha as the place of origin of the *Rasikapriya* and hence as the heartland of the *bhakti* movement.

My sincerest thanks go to all those who for more than five years have worked so indefatigably on the English edition of this work and who have made its publication possible. Especially worthy of mention among them is the Museum Rietberg's curator for Indian painting, Caroline Widmer, who besides overseeing the accessioning of the paintings is currently curating two exhibitions of works from the Seitz Collection. The publication of this monograph on Bundelkhand painting would not have been possible without the *Publikationsstiftung für das Museum Rietberg* and its support for Artibus Asiae Publishers, whose collaboration with Niyogi Books in Delhi and its Managing Director Bikash De Niyogi will ensure the work's availability in India. I would also like to thank Daniel Schneiter for his coordination of this ambitious publication project, Anne McGannon for copy-editing the first versions of the manuscript, Bronwen Saunders for her translation of large parts of the second and third volumes, Rainer Wolfsberger for his fantastic photographs and Thomas Humm for his processing of the same, and Helene Samyukta Leuzinger for the beautiful graphic design.

My greatest debt of thanks is naturally to Konrad and Eva Seitz themselves, for whose confidence in us, as evidenced by their priceless gift and wonderfully constructive collaboration, we are deeply grateful.

Annette Bhagwati
Director of the Museum Rietberg

This work in three volumes is an improved and expanded edition of my two-volume, German-language book from 2015, *Orchha, Datia, Panna: "Malwa"-Miniaturen von den rajputischen Höfen Bundelkhands, 1580–1820*. The goal of that book was to bring one of the great schools of Rajput painting out of the Cinderella existence into which it had been thrown by two fatal errors of research: (1) an absurd attribution of the school to Malwa, a Mughal province, and (2) a much too late date of 1634 for the founding series. The first error degraded this Rajput school to a provincial school; the second made it impossible to establish any credible evolution of the school's style. As a consequence, scholars and collectors alike lost all interest in "Malwa" paintings.

In my 2015 book I attributed the so-called "Malwa" paintings to the three Bundelkhand kingdoms of Orchha, Datia, and Panna, re-dated the founding series to circa 1592–95, and arranged the numerous series of the school into a stylistic evolution. These attributions and dates have by now been accepted in the academic world, and museums, auction houses, and art dealers have begun to catalog Bundelkhand paintings according to the series identified in the two German-language volumes. The steeply rising prices for such works indicate that collectors, too, are recognizing the school as an important Rajput school.

This first volume deals with the founding period of Orchha painting: the years 1590–1605. The re-dating of the four surviving series of this period means that the history of Rajput manuscript painting in the Mughal era has to be rewritten. This history no longer begins with the 1605 *Ragamala* of Mewar, but rather with the First Orchha *Rasikapriya* from circa 1592–95 (**cat. 1**), the basic series of the style, and the preceding *Gitagovinda* series from circa 1590 (**cat. 2**). These series reveal the Orchha school not only as the earliest Rajput school, but as the only one that in its initial period preserved the indigenous Indian style, "untainted" by the naturalism of Mughal painting. (See the comparison between the Mewar Chawand *Ragamala* and the First Orchha *Rasikapriya* in the Appendix to catalog 1, p. 231).

The Orchha school of painting took up where Early Rajput painting in the late Sultanate era left off. We therefore precede the history of Orchha painting with an account of the painting from this era. Here, too, we propose a new attribution and new dates, ascribing the surviving precursor series from the Sultanate time to the Hindu kingdom of the Tomar dynasty in nearby Gwalior (1398–1518) and dating them between circa 1460 and 1518.

All Orchha paintings have religious themes. They were inspired by and part of the *bhakti* revolution of the sixteenth century and its new gospel of salvation through ecstatic devotion to God. The central subject of the miniatures is the various emotions of Krishna's sacred love play with the *gopis* (cowherd women) of Vrindavana and, above all, with Radha, his chosen *gopi*.

The contemporary Indian viewer could look at these paintings in two ways. He could savor them as a *rasika* (connoisseur) in accordance with traditional *rasa* and *alamkara* aesthetics, experiencing the secular erotic sentiments of *shringara rasa* and admiring the beauty of the various ornaments (*alamkara*). And he could meditate on the paintings as a *bhakta* (devotee) in accordance with the new *bhakti-rasa* aesthetics, using the images as instruments for his meditative contemplations and aiming to reach the mystical rapture that would transport him into the presence of Krishna and his eternal love play in transcendent Vrindavana. Probably, he would combine both ways in his looking at the pictures.

In these volumes we shall interpret the Orchha miniatures in these two ways. In so doing, we apply to the interpretation of Rajput painting for the first time the *bhakti-rasa* aesthetics of Rupa Goswamin, the leading theologian of the Gaudiya order, which was the preeminent *bhakti* movement of the sixteenth century.

We shall also look at the paintings with our modern sensibility and analyze their formal design, using the concepts of modern art history, but keeping in mind that no contemporary Indian viewer would have appreciated them in this way.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work on the painting of the royal courts of Bundelkhand and their predecessor, the court of Gwalior, could not have been realized without the generous and untiring support of Professor Monika Horstmann, the eminent scholar of the *bhakti* movement in the Indian religion of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. She introduced me to the mystical *bhakti* religiosity that inspired the miniatures, and she read the inscriptions on the paintings, identified the verse texts, and translated them whenever no published translation was available. Without her help I would in particular have been unable to interpret the many *Rasikapriya* miniatures whose highly sophisticated verses are often inadequately or even wrongly rendered in the existing translations.

I thank you, Monika, with all my heart.

I also wish to express my deep gratitude to Mr. Daniel Schneider, the editor of the three volumes. His commitment to the project was unwavering, and his painstaking precision, applied to every aspect of the text and images, has ensured that these volumes are as flawless as they are beautiful. In addition, I had the good fortune to work with Ms. Anne McGannon, the copy-editor of Volume I. Again and again I was amazed how well Ms. McGannon understood what I wanted to say, or even what I should have said. I thank her for her assistance.