

RAGAMALA, AN INTRODUCTION

A *ragamala* is a set of miniature paintings depicting various musical modes, *ragas*, of north Indian music. Each painting is accompanied by a brief inscription that suggests the mood of the *raga*, most frequently love – in its various aspects – and devotion.

For nearly 400 hundred years *ragamala* was one of the most popular genres of Indian miniature painting. These exquisite painted melodies would have been commissioned and exchanged by admirers of painting, poetry and music. Yet, having thrived in the royal courts of India from the second half of the 15th century, this genre dwindled in the late 19th century with the decline of aristocratic patronage.

Ragamalas were created in most centres of Indian painting, but in the majority of cases the identity of the painters and scribes remains unknown. Interpretation of inscriptions and regional imagery helps us identify *ragamalas* of particular periods and localities.

The Claudio Moscatelli collection of 24 *ragamala* paintings encapsulates the striking differences in regional styles. These loose pages, from multiple *ragamala* sets, cover practically the whole of the Indian subcontinent: from the plains of Rajasthan, to the Pahari region in the foothills of the Himalayas, down to the Deccan and up to the mountains of Nepal.

EARLY RAGAMALAS

At their root is the sacred essence of the *raga* – five or more musical notes upon which a melody is played. More than just a sound, a *raga* evokes an emotional response in the listener; it should ‘colour’ the mind.

Medieval Hindustani musicians associated each *raga* with a deity, naming the *raga*, perhaps as a means of memorising the melodic structure. Intrigued poets of the late medieval period then personified the *ragas* and elaborated their tales in vivid verbal imagery. These stories, along with other influential texts on Indian classical music, provided the poetic source of *ragamala* painting.

The first known record of *ragamala* painting can be found on the margins of a now missing manuscript dated to c.1475, from western India. Images of dancing poses and personified musical notes were used to enliven the text.

Hindu deities personify the *ragas* and their *raginis*, the ‘wives’ of the *ragas*. Sitting in the centre of the top row Bhairava Raga is visualised as the many-armed god Shiva, his body smeared with holy ash, with his bull Nandi at his feet. To the far top right, the green Megha Raga is identified with the deity Vishnu; he wears a garland of flowers and a peacock rests at his feet.

Roughly a century divides the 15th-century manuscript illustrated here and the next surviving documentation of *ragamala* painting.

RAGAS

Shri

Vasanta

Bhairava

Panchama

Megha



Dravidi
Bhasa

Ramagiri

Bhasa

Abhiri

Debala

RAGINIS

FROM DIVINE ICONS TO NARRATIVE SCENES

By the middle of the 16th century *ragamala* painting began to move away from the depiction of singular divine icons. Narrative scenes of human beings in their own environment, expressing love and longing for their deity became the artists' focus.

The landscape and architectural surroundings, barely hinted at in early *ragamalas*, became more central to each painting. Views of daily life, particularly special events, were gradually added to the popular repertoire of *ragamala* subjects.

The spread of the Hindu devotional movement *bhakti* encouraged a more personal, emotional relationship between the devotee and the deity and undoubtedly had an influence on the change in focus in *ragamala* painting.

Other literary sources which may explain the shift in *ragamala* themes are treatises on love, such as Keshava Dasa of Orchha's *Rasikapriya*, c.1591, in which the Hindu gods Radha and Krishna are a model for human lovers. The three main characters are the hero, the heroine and her confidante. Their courtship, misunderstandings, tiffs and eventual reconciliations gave poets, and in turn painters, ample inspiration.

THE MIGRATION OF RAGAMALA

Constant changes in administrative and military postings around the empire during the Mughal period (16th–19th centuries) were an important factor in the transmission of *ragamala* painting styles and subjects.

It is likely that painters and scribes travelled across the Indian subcontinent with their aristocratic patrons. Imagery commonly found in early *ragamalas* from Rajasthan, in northern India, is curiously repeated in later *ragamalas* in other far-flung parts of the Empire.

Artists from Rajasthan, who traditionally produced small *ragamala* sets of 36 or 42 paintings, would travel to the Deccan, southern India, where larger *ragamala* sets, containing up to 86 paintings, were more popular. Confronted with commissions for more complex *ragamalas*, the Rajasthani painters and scribes would reinvent subject matter familiar to them and fill in the gaps.

The migration of *ragamalas* and the artists from southern India northwards was also influential in the creation of 'hybrid' imagery, based on guesswork, as well as puns on the many meanings of the word *raga* itself.

DEVOTION AND THE DECCAN

Love, especially unfulfilled and consuming passion, is an overarching theme of *ragamala* painting. Each of the following pages from a set produced in the southern Deccan depicts a heroine in a particular state of love.

While love in union is occasionally represented, scenes of longing and loss frequently hold centre stage. In the wake of devotional movements which swept through northern India from the 14th century, both Hindu and Muslim mystics interpreted 'love in separation' as an allegory of the human soul divided from God. It is personified by the *virahini*, the woman separated from her lover. In employing the imagery of love five Deccani paintings display how a passionate devotion to God is the only means of salvation.

Offsetting the dramatic foreground, the linear backdrop owes a great deal to the later Mughal style which encouraged painters to use perspectival recession. Such compositions owe a great deal to a style developed in the north for the Nawabs (rulers) of Oudh. Nawab Shuja' ud-Daula and his son Asaf ud-Daula employed a number of European painters at their court, including artists such as Johan Zoffany and Tilly Kettle and it is not surprising that European-inspired devices were put to effective use by *ragamala* painters.

NEPALESE RAGAMALA

Ragamala paintings from Nepal are relatively rare. The mainstream tradition of Nepalese painting was devoted to sacred themes, and paintings were intended to aid the viewer in performing religious observance.

These mid-17th-century pages follow the horizontal format of Nepalese sacred manuscripts of the medieval period. When they are turned over, the reverse image appears upside-down, which suggests an original binding along their top edges.

The patron, city of origin and date of completion are unknown. Compared with other contemporary Nepalese paintings, this manuscript does not appear to have been produced at a royal court, but is rather a work commissioned by a merchant or nobleman who was particularly devoted to music.