

VOLUME 2 | ISSUE 4 | JANUARY-MARCH 2020



# NAAARI

**THE MAGNIFICENT  
MEWAR  
PAINTINGS**

**ANURADHA BHAGWATI  
DIARY OF  
DISOBEDIENCE**

**POOJA SHENOY  
FROM OBSTETRICIAN  
TO DOULA**



*Lisa Ray*

**'BY THE TIME I WAS READY, I COULD  
NOT HAVE CHILDREN MEDICALLY.  
I OPTED FOR SURROGACY'**

# MEWAR PAINTINGS

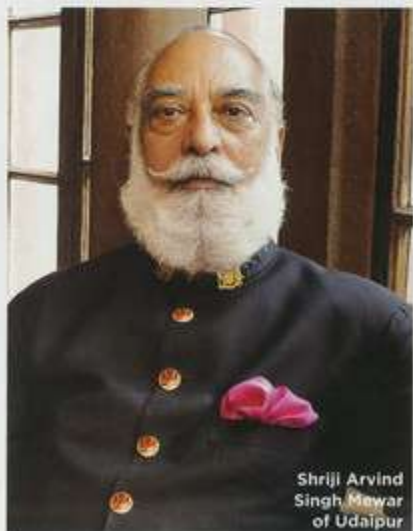
## A CHRONICLE OF THEIR TIME

The Rajput rulers had their ateliers where artists produced astounding paintings that were a record of the time their patrons lived in. One such school is that of Mewar whose scions are now based in Udaipur and take great pride in their heritage. MALLIK THATIPALLI visits the City Palace Museum in Udaipur, and speaks to the current ruler, Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar, and the assistant curator to frame a picture of the Mewar school

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The Mewar dynasty is the world's oldest continuous unbroken line of succession, going back 1,500 years. While the erstwhile Mewar region comprised parts of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, today, the Mewar scions are based in Udaipur and take pride in their rich history, tradition and culture.

Much like other royal houses of the Rajputana, the Mewar culture gave prominence to art, architecture, textiles and cuisine. The aesthetics of their culture reaches the zenith in their art, famous for centuries for the prolific and artistically significant paintings.



Shriji Arvind  
Singh Mewar  
of Udaipur

The Mewar School of painting derived its name from the region it was developed in. Likewise, there were several schools and sub-schools of painting across the Indian subcontinent. Each region, with its topography, geographic location and climate, had an impact on the type of painting, the themes or the colour palette. The patron, and the conditions during the time, too, influenced the type of work produced.

### ORIGINS

The art of realistic portraiture and court reportage first flourished in India at the Mughal court in the reigns of Akbar (r. 1556-1605) and Jahangir (r. 1605-1627). Keen and innovating patrons, both emperors encouraged their painters to follow European models as well as native Indian and Persian traditions. This ambitious synthesis of styles resulted in the dramatic illustrations and historical manuscripts of Akbar's time and the superbly refined portraits, durbar (court) scenes and flora and fauna scenes commissioned by Jahangir.

By the mid-17th century, the Rajput chiefs of Jodhpur, Amber and Bundi began to emulate this imperial taste. Rajasthani portraiture, which traditionally used only indigenous styles, was influenced by the Mughal portraits, resulting in a unique style.

At Mewar, the earliest royal portraits and court scenes, dating from the 1670s and 1680s, are of Maharana Raj Singh I (r. 1652-1680) and Maharana Jai Singh (r. 1680-1698). They tend to follow contemporary models; it is only from the reign of Maharana Amar Singh II (r. 1698-1710) that the Mewar school acquired a life of its own and a distinctive viewpoint, observant of both the private pursuits and public life of its rulers.



Maharana Bhupal Singh (r. 1930-1955) presiding over the Ashwa-Gaj Poojan at Manek Chowk, 1939 or earlier

Produced by the hereditary artist families for successive Maharanas for almost three centuries, this remained the basic narrative style in progressive adaptations. Impressive in their sheer size and fascinating in their narrative detail, the panoramic collections of artworks detail durbars, processions, hunts and festivals patronised by the Mewar royal family.

Chelsea Alannah Santos, Assistant Curator at The City Palace Museum, Udaipur, says, "The style of painting that developed at the court of Mewar was vibrant and bold in its colour choices, and vigorously expressive. Since the times were peaceful, the members of the Mewar family were able to turn their attention towards the arts, and cultivate and patronise them. The fact that there was so much art that was thriving in Mewar, and prolific use of gold and silver in these paintings, is indicative of sound socio-economic and political conditions."

Prior to Udaipur, which eventually became the capital of Mewar, the city of Chittor existed as a prime centre of early Rajput style of manuscript illustration. The illustrated manuscripts, i.e. textual matter provided with imagery, as their name suggests, were hand-painted and small in size. Eventually, as emphasis on the illustrations or paintings increased and, with the support of ambitious patrons, the size of these paintings increased.



Maharana Swarup Singh (r. 1842-1861) playing Holi on horseback at Manek Chowk, The City Palace, Udaipur in March 1851

By the early 18th century, Udaipur in north-western India was at the centre of pioneering material and pictorial experiments in presenting the sensorial, embodied experience of space. A wide range of objects, from large-scale court paintings, three to five feet long, to painted invitation letter scrolls up to 72 feet long, formed representations of Udaipur's lands, lakes, and bazaars as well as Northern India's prominent temples and Indo-British durbars.

These objects demanded audiences make emotional connections of belonging and longing for real places in the present, and in imagined ideal times in the future. Udaipur's painters, poets, scribes, and travellers offered bhava – the feel, mood, and emotion – of a place as a rich, layered category.

Such description of territorialities and of spatial knowledge in topographical images, when placed in the wider history of painted lands, can be seen to confront European visions of history, aesthetics and landscapes.

### THE COLLECTION

There are around 1,800 paintings in the collection of the Museum, which capture several aspects of life in 16th century Mewar up until the modern day (the oldest painting in the collection dates to the 16th century). Many of these works, all previously under the custodianship of the Mewar family, are on display in the Bhagwat Prakash Gallery in The City Palace Museum, Udaipur.

The Mewar paintings are an important part of the Museum's collection. Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar is the 76th custodian of the House of Mewar and Chairman and Managing Trustee of MMCF (Maharana of Chittor

Charitable Foundation). The Mewar family ruled as diwans or custodians on behalf of their family deity – Shree Eklingnathji.

He says that these artworks open gloriously coloured windows to the past. "The vivacity and detail of these paintings always amaze me. While the playfulness of the moment is captured perfectly in one painting, in another one can almost hear the beat of horse hooves. So perfectly realised are these representations of the architecture of the Palace Complex that we have often used these paintings as resources in the restoration of these buildings."

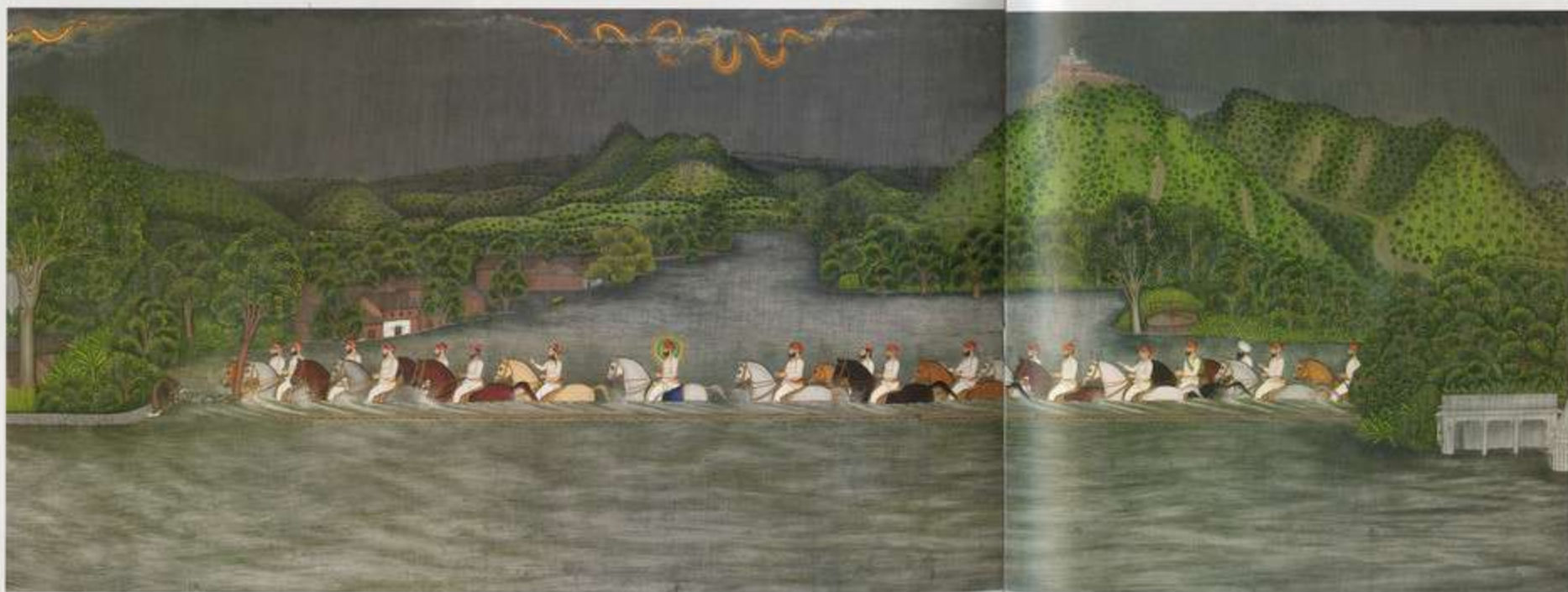
Indeed, in the absence of photography, these paintings, which were meticulously crafted over centuries, become the purveyors of the past. As buildings are tweaked for modern use, they are detailed sentinels which show how the topography has changed over the centuries.

### THEMES AND TIMELINES

The different regions, such as Udaipur, that acted as capitals of the region of Mewar, served as the nucleus of the society, thriving as a hub of cultural activities. There were large public gatherings, royal processions, hunts, fairs and festivities that were full of life and colour; all of these found expression in the paintings.



Maharana Fateh Singh (1884-1930) crossing a river in flood, Udaipur, 1893



*These details come in handy in case any painting needs to be restored. A state-of-the-art conservation laboratory has been set up at The City Palace Museum, Udaipur.*

**PAINSTAKING CONSERVATION TREATMENTS ARE ADMINISTERED TO THE PAINTINGS IN THIS LABORATORY, AND ROUTINE CHECKS ARE CONDUCTED ON THE COLLECTION IN STORE AND ON DISPLAY**

**Maharana Jawan Singh (r. 1828-1838)  
at a Vaishnava recitation in Amar Vilas  
(Baadi Mahal), The City Palace, Udaipur 1835**

Different patrons had their own ideas and contributions to the Mewar school. The reign of Maharana Amar Singh II saw him not only conventionally seated with nobles but also playing polo, dallying with the ladies in the zenana (women's quarters) or visiting the temple of Shree Eklingnathji. Maharana Sangram Singh II (r. 1710-34) furthered his father's initiatives. He took on bigger projects, with large-size paintings being produced. The palace often served as a backdrop in paintings during his reign.

The pleasure-seeking Maharana Jagat Singh II (r. 1734-51) ensured that a lasting record of ceremonies and festivals or marriage processions was created during his reign. The inscriptions from his reign provide the names of the artists, and confirms the practice of groups of artists working together on the paintings.

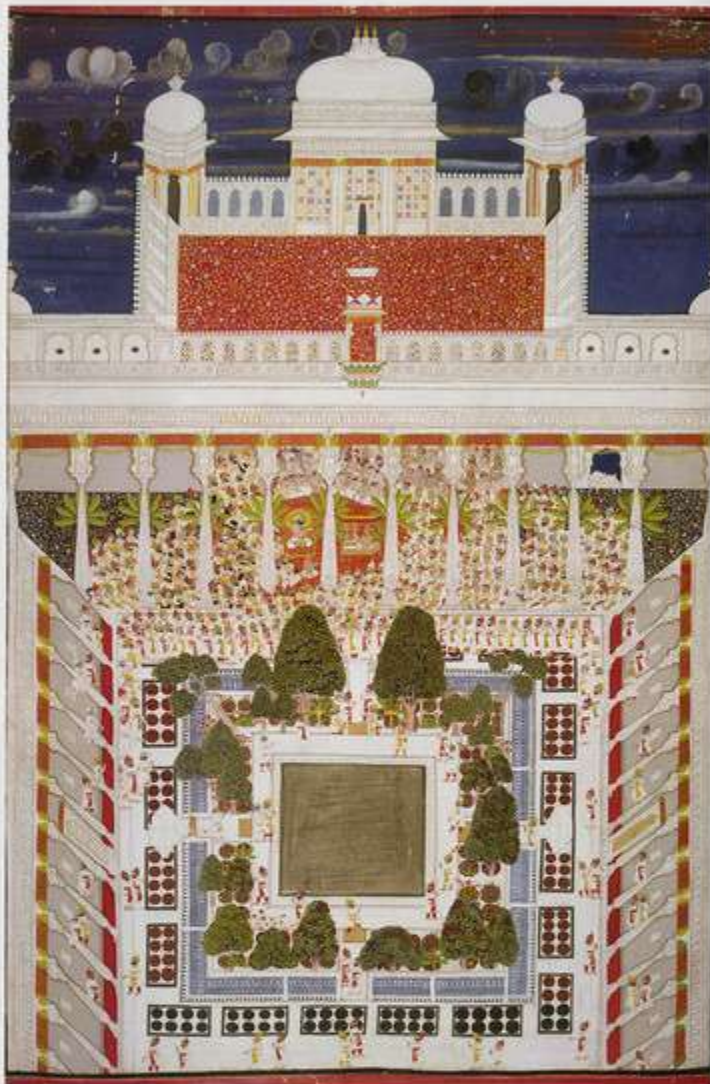
Santos adds, "Yes, we do have instances where we find writings on paintings wherein artists or the head of the studio have named their works as belonging to them. At times we find more than one name, indicative of the artists having worked in pairs or groups. Examples include Pyara and Naga, Syaji and Sukha, Bhima and Kesu Ram, Pannalal and Chhaganlal, etc."

Few paintings were produced during the reign of Maharana Bheem Singh (r. 1778-1828). Paintings welcoming British agents as well as depictions of Gangaur, Holi, Navaratri and Diwali paintings are the highlights of this era.

During the reign of Maharana Fateh Singh (r. 1884-1930) the shaky relationship with the British was visible as none of the paintings commemorated the visits of the English royals; shikars or hunts were frequent subjects. The paintings were created well into the 1930s and were housed in huge libraries.

*"The vivacity and detail of these paintings always amaze me. While the playfulness of the moment is captured perfectly in one painting, in another one can almost hear the beat of horse hooves."*

**SO PERFECTLY REALISED ARE THESE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE PALACE COMPLEX THAT WE HAVE OFTEN USED THESE PAINTINGS AS RESOURCES IN THE RESTORATION OF THESE BUILDINGS"**



Much later, these paintings made their way into the collection of The City Palace Museum, Udaipur.

In the creation of these pieces of art, artists, particularly the head of the studio, would have some level of narrative freedom in the execution of the paintings but were expected to be sensitive towards and aware of other works such as literature, that often backed these paintings.

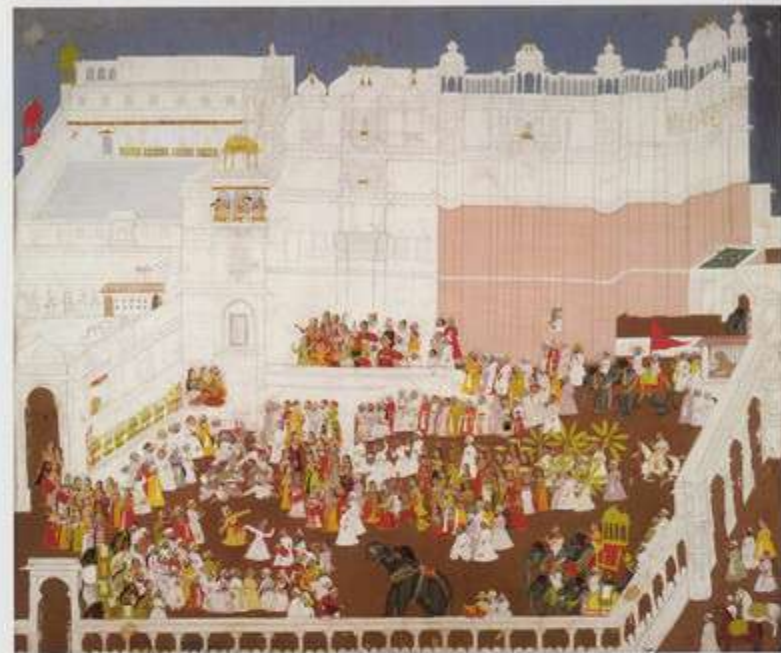
Santos explains, "The painters were often engaged in dialogue with the librarian, acharyas (spiritual teachers) and priests or pundits. The head of the studio, along with the librarian, would jointly outline what was expected from the project at the very start. In the initial drawing stages, the artists would be guided by the librarian or pundits, carefully explaining the texts to them. There would thus be a mix of influences behind a particular piece of art, such as those mentioned above, in addition to what the patron himself envisioned."

## TECHNIQUES AND DOCUMENTATION

The paintings (four to six feet) are huge, and the detailing astounding. Some of the larger paintings capture hundreds of people, flora and fauna in minute detail, drawing the viewer's attention instantly. Particularly striking are the paintings at the pleasure palaces which masterfully detail the costumes, textiles and styles of the subjects.

Some paintings feature the Maharanas in multiple moods and narratives in a single frame.

The paintings suggest that there was definitely a lot happening, almost leaving nothing to one's imagination. This technique, that was used by the Mewar school to depict multiple scenes or stories in one painting, is called 'simultaneous narration', with a 'bird's eye view', that enables temporal and spatial progression in a highly sophisticated manner within the framework of the painting. This technique was developed by an artist called Sahib Din, the head of the studio for a significant portion of time during the reign of Maharana Jagat Singh I (r. 1628-1652), and who derived considerable inspiration from Mughal compositions. His style was adopted by several artists that succeeded him. So, in case of the Maharana being depicted multiple times, engaged in various activities, within a painting, the artist attempts to convey a progression of events within the limited space of his canvas.



**Maharana Sangram Singh celebrating the birth of Prince Pratap Singh | Udaipur | 1724**

Others have the people depicted in the paintings marked. Santos adds that this was supplemented by the inscriptions or writings behind the paintings which gave an in-depth description of the scenes portrayed and the persons depicted. "More interesting are the writings found, at times, beneath paint layers; the artists would often make notes over their sketches, indicating the colours to be filled or the names of or the manner in which the character was to be depicted," she explains.

These details come in handy in case any painting needs to be restored. A state-of-the-art conservation laboratory has been set up at The City Palace Museum, Udaipur. Painstaking conservation treatments are administered to the paintings in this laboratory, and routine checks are conducted on the collection in store and on display.

The real value of these paintings is not in monetary terms but in terms of their immense heritage. As Shriji says, "When I go to Eklingji today, I do not perhaps go in the same way Maharana Bheem Singh did in his day, with a score of caparisoned elephants and horses, which we know as it was recorded in a painting. But, due to the record provided by these art works, I feel the presence of 75 generations who made the journey before me. These paintings are both cultural and academic resources. They provide us new insights into our long and complex history and, hopefully, enable us to learn valuable lessons from it."