

## INTRODUCTION

---

**I****N THE TWELFTH REGNAL YEAR OF GOPĀLA (IV)**—a Pāla king who ruled parts of India in what is now Bihar and West Bengal during the first half of the twelfth century—a lay woman named Aṅghākā commissioned a sumptuously painted palm-leaf manuscript of an important Mahāyāna scripture, the *Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Verses* (*Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, henceforth *Perfection of Wisdom*). The commission was intended to benefit her “priest, teacher, parents, and all sentient beings in attaining supreme knowledge.”<sup>1</sup> Only six out of the 206 folios of the manuscript were subject to painting. In these six folios, the unnamed miniaturist executed every given space with dexterity and finesse. On each folio, surrounding the two prebored holes for binding, were placed decorative bands filled with swirling vegetal patterns emerging from a monster’s mouth: the dark green tendrils are accentuated with light yellow highlighting and shaded with deep blue against a vibrant red backdrop with yellow borders (figure 0.1). Each band measures about 2 cm in width, and it would have required a brush that was about 2/100 mm in diameter to execute the fine lines.



FIGURE 0.1  
Decorative pattern on the band around the string hole. Detail of figure 0.2.

The vibrancy of color is absolutely stunning nearly nine hundred years after its production. On the last folio of the manuscript, three painted panels contain a red goddess flanked by blue and yellow bodhisattvas (figure 0.2). Kurukullā, the red goddess in the center panel, is adorned with intricate jewelry and an ornate crown. She is seated within a golden yellow shrine-like frame decorated with a swirly motif and a *hamsa* (swan) on either end, supported by two *vyālas* (mythical lions). The large cushion behind her displays an intricate textile pattern in organic blue and red (most likely indigo and lac)—the same colors that would have dyed contemporary textiles. The lotus seat where she sits cross-legged, drawing a flower bow, is rendered with blue, red, and green petals with yellow outlines. This acme of color pops even more brilliantly against the light brown palm leaf whose veins and suppleness still retain their organic character. The Sanskrit text in black ink is written in an ornamental *kuṭīla* (hooked) script, a calligraphic variety of the cosmopolitan *siddhamatrka* script. Its flamboyance supports the brilliance of the painting.

Although this folio (along with a fragment of folio 101) was separated from the original manuscript, and now resides in a museum, it is worth remembering that it once belonged to



FIGURE 0.2

Folio 206r, *Perfection of Wisdom* manuscript, date: ca. 1143 CE (twelfth regnal year of Gopāla [IV]), patron: laywoman Anaghākā, West Bengal. Organic and mineral pigments and soot ink on palm leaf, size: 6.7 × 48.6 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1987-52-14. Photo courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art.

a manuscript.<sup>2</sup> This was not a codex, but a special type of manuscript called *pothi* in Hindi, unique to Indic manuscript cultures. Among other things, a *pothi* was a portable object, and it often traveled far. Under the original donor’s colophon on this same folio, another donor recorded his pious actions with the manuscript. This time, a hereditary Buddhist monk (*śākyabhikṣu*) named Śrī Amṛtadeva, a resident of Tvam vihāra in Bhaktāpur, performed a *pratiṣṭha* ritual to renew and install the manuscript as a cultic object.<sup>3</sup> No date is given in this later colophon, but it seems reasonable to suppose the manuscript left the territory of Gopāla in eastern Bihar or West Bengal sometime after its production and came into the possession of Amṛtadeva in Bhaktapur, Nepal, probably no later than the year 1300.

While it is impossible to reconstruct the historical circumstances underlying the manuscript’s production and transregional migration, two things might be said about it: first, as a *pothi*-format palm-leaf manuscript, it was portable—even with more than two hundred folios, each measuring about 6.5 × 56 cm—and easily packed for travel to distant destinations; and second, the artisanal intelligence required to make miniature paintings in brilliant primary colors on the surface of palm leaves, depicting a complex iconography known by few outside ritual specialists, existed by the mid-twelfth century in certain parts of India. These two aspects adumbrate two of the central questions motivating this book: Why do primary colors dominate the palette of Indian miniature painting? And how did individual color choices and their collective palette structure knowledge and experience for the viewer?

This book examines the development of Indic manuscript painting during the first half of the second millennium to answer these questions. It takes color—which along with materiality is acutely understudied in South Asian art—as a primary vector of investigation. It contends that the adoption of a *pothi*-format manuscript by visionaries, ritual specialists, and artists as a medium for painting in Indic religious circles enabled the material translation of a private and internal experience of “seeing” into a portable device. In this process, color was neither decorative nor representational; it was the material link between a vision and its artistic output. To understand these manuscript paintings from an emic perspective, this study follows transsectarian and transregional approaches to its subject and uses analytical methods adopted from the study of material culture. Manuscripts are portable objects; as precious religious gifts, powerful cultic objects, or insignia of religious authority, they can move, even within a single

location—from a store room to a pedestal, for instance—and at times change hands, sometimes over great distances. The geographic area explored in this study is extensive, connecting Silk Road sites like Khotan and Dunhuang with centers of manuscript production in the South Asian subcontinent. A southern limit to its scope is provided by the Narmada River, since most of the manuscripts I discuss hail from regions north of the traditional boundary between north and south India.<sup>4</sup> Its temporal field is the period between 1000 and 1500 CE—within a “medieval” time frame in global reckoning. A final caveat: although this study proposes alternative ways to approach the history of Indian painting, it is not an exhaustive survey of medieval Indian manuscript painting. Instead, it focuses on the many guises that *pothi*-format manuscripts assumed while functioning as archives, envoys, teachers, and translators of various forms of knowledge across time and space.<sup>5</sup>

To answer the question of why primary colors dominated the palette of Indian miniature painting, we must turn to what Ananda K. Coomaraswamy—the first curator of Indian art in North America and its preeminent savant—called the “blank” period, a time in India when there was “no one great religious inspiration.” In the early decades of the twentieth century, when Coomaraswamy was active, the prevailing assessment of Indian tantric traditions was that they were degenerate and corrupt forms of religion; hence, the view that the religious landscape of medieval South Asia provided no great inspiration for artistic activity.<sup>6</sup> As we will see, however, tantric communities made substantial contributions to the art of painting in at least two areas: color theory and material culture. By devising procedures for seeing transcendent objects in a specific set of colors, tantric visionary practice provided a color scheme, based on primary colors, that could be harnessed for artistic purposes, namely, the translation of visionary experience into paintings that would circulate beyond the immediate locus of their productions. In certain tantric communities, there also were seekers (*siddhas*) pursuing transmutation through alchemical tantras who experimented with the ritual use of cinnabar (mercuric sulfide), the mineral source of vermilion.<sup>7</sup> Since the main ores for mineral cinnabar were outside the South Asian subcontinent, vermilion was an exceedingly precious commodity when it was introduced to artisanal practice in medieval South Asia.

The skills required to produce a miniature were intimately tied to the art of the book. Manuscripts in South Asia were traditionally prepared with birch bark and palm leaves cut to uniform size and strung together through one or two prebored holes. Wooden book covers were provided to protect the folios. A *pothi*-format manuscript was normally oblong, a shape determined by the source material, usually palm leaves measuring 5–6 cm in width (in the case of the so-called talipot palm, *Corypha umbraculifera*, the most common type of palm used in the material examined for this study). With this material, the maximum available space on a given page does not exceed 6 × 55 cm. Given the limited space available to painters, each painted panel on a folio typically measured around 5 × 5.5 cm.

A miniature painting on a page in a Buddhist manuscript, such as the goddess Kurukullā in figure 0.2, rarely finds mention in most narratives of the history of Indian painting, especially after the arrival of the Mughals. The nominally Buddhist subject matter might prompt us to look for more ready comparisons in Buddhist communities nearby. In fact, most early

examples of manuscript painting from South Asia come from Buddhist circles, with some exceptional examples hailing from Nepal. We remember that Aṅghākā's manuscript was taken to Bhaktapur in the Kathmandu valley, where it remained in ritual use, and the iconography of a four-armed red goddess holding a red lotus and drawing a flower bow finds a close parallel in a painting in another manuscript prepared in Nepal (dated 1071), now in the Asiatic Society, Kolkata (A15, folio 152v). The goddess Kurukullā also appears in a number of later Tibetan *thangkas*, suggesting that a Himalayan connection in the development of manuscript painting in South Asia might reward exploration. A sectarian transregional model, however, provides little room to consider the legacy and the contributions of Buddhist manuscript painters in the later history of Indian painting. Here, let us consider an alternative transregional model.

### TRANSREGIONAL AND TRANSTEMPORAL CONNECTIONS

As portable objects traveling across different regions, South Asian manuscripts have survived many centuries of use, opening windows to distant connections across time and space. The painting in figure 0.3 was prepared on a vertically oriented sheet of paper. The top register occupying about one-eighth of the page contains a vernacular text (most likely a form of Braj) written in black ink. In comparison to the Sanskrit script in figure 0.2, the scribing seems less controlled, even casual, coinciding with the conversational tone of the text. The text is a cajoling message from Kṛṣṇa that the *sakhi* (the go-between and confidante) delivers to Rādhā, telling her how Kṛṣṇa is love stricken and longing to see her and urging her “come, go and meet Kṛṣṇa struck by Kāma's arrow!”<sup>8</sup> Below this text the scene unfolds in three compartments: the top section shows Rādhā in her apartment being swarmed by bees and addressed by the *sakhi*, whose standing position and lowered left hand connect Rādhā's space to the dense forest where Kṛṣṇa dejectedly longs for his lover; opposite Kṛṣṇa's forest is an inverted U-shaped bower, in which a female figure seated on a fully opened lotus draws a flower bow with a lotus stem as an arrow. This figure is commonly taken to be Kāma, or his female consort, Ratī. The accompanying text tells us that Kṛṣṇa is struck by Kāma's arrow. The comparison to Kurukullā's bow and arrow is inevitable.

As the goddess of desire, Kurukullā was regarded in tantric Buddhist communities as a personal deity of some importance.<sup>9</sup> It is unlikely that Kṛṣṇa's painter, identified as Sāhib Dīn (Sahib al-Din), a Muslim painter who served the Hindu Mewar court in seventeenth-century Rajasthan, would have been aware of any recondite Buddhist iconography.<sup>10</sup> Yet images of Kurukullā continued to be made in central Tibet and remained popular from the sixteenth century on. Indrani Chatterjee suggests that through “monastic geographicity” the Himalayan and trans-Himalayan regions remained connected to the rest of the South Asian subcontinent from the thirteenth through nineteenth centuries. Tibetan tantric and Mahāyāna Buddhist lineages “occupied the same terrain” as “the Sufi, Vaiṣṇava, and Śaiva lineages of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries,” yet are forgotten in colonial and postcolonial scholarship.<sup>11</sup> The earliest surviving miniature painting of Kurukullā places her on the Kurukullā peak in present-day Gujarat, and the iconography of the goddess may