

Contact:
Tim Hallman (415) 581-3711
or pr@asianart.org

PRINCES, PALACES, AND PASSION: THE ART OF INDIA'S MEWAR KINGDOM
February 2–April 29, 2007

First Exhibition Outside India to Explore the Art of Fabled Rajasthani Kingdom

SAN FRANCISCO, CA, DECEMBER 11, 2006: When the nineteenth-century American painter Edwin Lord Weeks arrived at Udaipur, the capital of Mewar in India's Rajasthan—the “Land of Kings”—region, he found a city “airy, unreal, and fantastic as a dream, - stretching away in a seemingly endless perspective of latticed cupolas, domes, turrets, and jutting oriel-windows, rising tier above tier, at a dizzy height from the ground ...”



Lovers on a terrace, approx. 1810. Circle of Chokha. Rajasthan state, probably Udaipur, former kingdom of Mewar. Opaque colors on paper. Promised gift to Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. Mr. and Mrs. John Gilmore Ford Collection, F.329.

Few regions of India have excited the imagination as much as the kingdom of Mewar. It was celebrated as the most heroic and illustrious of the kingdoms that made up the northwestern area of present day India. Despite this, very few museum exhibitions have been devoted to the innovative artists whose work helped establish the state's reputation. *Princes, Palaces, and Passion: The Art of India's Mewar Kingdom*, an exhibition presented at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco from February 2 through April 29, 2007, addresses that deficiency by gathering some seventy-four objects encompassing the depth and range of Mewar's artistic achievement. *Princes, Palaces, and Passion* was organized by the Asian Art Museum, and curated by Dr. Joanna Williams, professor of art history at University of California, Berkeley. The exhibition will be on view in the museum's Osher Gallery, and the Asian Art Museum will serve as the only venue.

In the making for more than eight years, this exhibition—the first outside India to focus on the art of this fabled Rajasthani kingdom—features artworks ranging from the early sixteenth century to the early twentieth century, borrowed from important museum and private collections in Great Britain, Australia, and the United States. At the core is a selection of paintings that dramatically conveys the brilliance of Mewar's artistic traditions. The exhibition brings to life some of the great individual Mewari painters—especially Bakhta (active 1760–1810) and his son, Chokha (active 1799–1824), who previously have been largely relegated to anonymity.

The exhibition also breaks new ground in viewing the complex links between the arts of the court and the arts of the village. Through the inclusion of such works as terracotta devotional panels, large temple paintings on cloth, and a miniature shrine and huge painting for village retellings of heroic legends, the exhibition highlights some of the many ways in which court, temple, and village were inextricably linked.

All of the material in *Princes, Palaces, and Passion* originates from Rajasthan, the region of India—in terms of visual associations, folk art, tourism, and merchandise—most familiar to museum-goers. The most powerful Hindu kingdom in Rajasthan was Mewar with its capital located at Udaipur, a city known for its beautiful palaces and vibrant cultural traditions. Mewar's defense of its first capital at Chittaur against waves of Muslim invaders between the early fourteenth and the late sixteenth centuries caused it to be celebrated as the most heroic and illustrious of the Rajput states. In response to the siege of Chittaur the Mewar capital was moved south to Udaipur in the 1560s. From that base, until 1615, Mewar stood as the last holdout until it, too, was forced to submit to the Muslim Mughal empire.

In defending his state and its values, a Mewar ruler was expected to measure up to the ideal of heroism. Paintings of princely hunts and sport, produced throughout India's courts, immortalize such heroism. Royal hunts were occasions for displaying wealth, territory, and resources, and for demonstrating the martial prowess with which every Indian ruler was expected to guard his state and his subjects.

An important aspect of the exhibition focuses on the royal courts of Mewar which supported the production of great paintings from the seventeenth through early twentieth centuries. Rulers were expected to be generous patrons supporting their communities. Over the centuries these rulers made gifts to schools and religious institutions as well as to artists, artisans, and performers. Most courts maintained painting workshops, but in Mewar, court artists made a speciality of documenting the activities of reigning kings. Two particularly memorable royal patrons from this period are examined. During the reign of Bhim Singh of Udaipur (1778–1828), continuous internal power struggles resulted in the eventual acceptance of British suzerainty yet the continual commission of grand paintings reflected the previous glories of the state. Udaipur was the overlord of the smaller state of Devgarh which had an equally vibrant culture. From 1786–1821 Devgarh was ruled by the physically immense and intellectually complex Gokul Das, who took political and artistic advantage of his overlord's weaknesses, making a dramatic impact on courtly painting in the region.

Indian art has often been considered the production of anonymous artists uninterested in leaving personal legacies. This view is beginning to be challenged. *Princes, Palaces, and Passion*

brings together for the first time more than a dozen paintings by two Mewar painters, Bakhta and his son, Chokha, as well as pictures created by a number of known artists.

The miniature paintings are truly remarkable pictures, illustrating Hindu stories, epic myths, charismatic gods, and royal heroes, as well as private and intimate moments. The presentation of these subjects may be strikingly dramatic in the case of religious and heroic pictures, and visually intriguing and sensual in images of a more personal or erotic nature.

A highlight of the exhibition is the 1761 painting by Bakhta entitled *Maharana Jagat Singh and companions hunting boar at Khas Odi*, which features an annual spring hunt and festival. At the left in this painting a wild boar (portrayed twice) is being executed at close range by the solemn maharana (king). The viewer is brought close to the ruler, who stands out by virtue of scale and strong line rather than through the glitter of gold. He and his nobles are set in a solid pink enclosure, which picks up tones of the clouds and the cushion in the royal barge. The expansive landscape of lobed hills and small trees is punctuated by a pattern of light, rough crossed lines probably made by dabs with a piece of cloth dipped in pigment. This is the first dated work by Bakhta, providing an excellent example in which his distinctive sensibility toward landscapes and the use of colorful washes in the sky characterize this artist's distinctive style.

Another painting of note is the early nineteenth century watercolor *Lovers on a terrace*, believed to have been created within the circle of Bakhta's son, Chokha, which features a couple in an ardent embrace. The man in this couple is an unidentified prince. The lovers' amorous position suggests passive delight on the woman's part. The man's eyes focus on the woman's breasts, and her eyes on the colors of the clouds. This image seems to belong to a group of versions of a similar subject produced by Chokha and his contemporaries in training or in competition. This picture is perhaps the most attractive in the series, with the luminous colors of the bolsters framing the delicately painted torsos. This painter was skilled in various kinds of brushwork: delicately refined for the faces, flat for the intense textiles, and pale for the washes of sky and the fine white cotton clothing that mutes the colors beneath.

Such an assembly of paintings provides a fascinating look at the work of individual artists, presented in the full scope of their career undertakings and accomplishments. While in Western art it is quite common to analyze the work of particular artists, citing influences and evolution, such consideration has rarely deemed possible for Indian artists. The presentation of these individuals as artists who succeeded in creating compelling masterpieces offers a fresh understanding of the courtly painting milieu, in particular, and of the way Indian artists traditionally worked.

Most exhibitions of art from the Rajasthani kingdoms have focused on courtly artistic production, rarely exploring the ways in which the histories, beliefs, narratives, and customs of court, temple, and village intersect. But such links go beyond the mere commissioning of village artists to produce objects for the court—village arts played a role in the broader religious and cultural arena. Scroll paintings narrating the legends of village gods and heroes functioned as portable shrines. The epic stories of these gods incorporate ideals of heroism and honor, showing village participation in the same myth-making traditions as those practiced at court.

Among the folk arts featured in the exhibition is a watercolor on cotton wall hanging for the festival of Sharad Purnima, dated to approx. 1880. A large cloth hanging like this, known as a *picchavai* (literally, “that which hangs behind”) was made for a temple or shrine in a private home. The central image of Krishna as Shri Nathji, his arm forever raised to hold aloft Mt. Govardhana and protect his villagers, is flanked by beautiful village girls and two priests. A full moon in a starry sky identifies this as a painting for Purnima, the full-moon festival of the autumn. At the bottom of the hanging, other events are encapsulated. On the left Krishna arises from a hill that is in fact a mountain of rice like that created every winter at Nathadwara for the festival of Annakut. On the right Krishna plays tax collector and insists the village girls pour him a toll of milk. The small compartments surrounding the sides and top of the *picchavai* constitute a running calendar of the major festivals celebrated in Shri Nathji’s shrine, differentiated by the god’s costume as well as the form of worship.

The work of village artisans is a vibrant feature of Mewar’s artistic landscape. The potters’ village of Molela still makes images for tribal people, who walk hundreds of miles across hills and desert to take these terracottas (examples featured in the exhibition) back to their modest yet colorful mud shrines. Furthermore, three towns in this region have long produced large paintings of folk epics known as *phads*. A *bhopa*, a storyteller/priest, would purchase a painting from a Brahman painter and travel on camel-back all over Rajasthan to perform at important events for the herder communities. The exhibition includes a *phads*, which is at once a complex picture, a backdrop, and a shrine to the deified hero. The exhibition-related programs include presentations at the Asian Art Museum by a *bhopa* from India. The daily presentations are tentatively scheduled for 2:30 pm, April 5 through 15 (please confirm at www.asianart.org).

Princes, Palaces, and Passion goes beyond an exploration of the courtly arts of Rajasthan to highlight some of the many ways in which court, temple, and village were inextricably linked. The artworks on view explores the rich interactions that occurred between specific courts and many different aesthetic arenas. There are interesting caste and family connections among different painting traditions in the Mewar region. In Nathadwara, traditional

painters producing the *picchwais* have the same caste background as the aforementioned imperial painters, and their present-day milieu may shed light on the origins of other great painters.

Likewise the long narrative cloth *phads* were created by painters with caste connections to the other groups. The itinerant nature of these images is a fascinating example of the dispersal of style.

Illuminating the brilliant arts of Mewar, *Princes, Palaces and Passion* brings to life the vibrant kingdom that enchanted Edwin Lord Weeks with its “delightful confusion of light and color.”

Media Preview:

A media preview for *Princes, Palaces and Passion: The Art of India's Mewar Kingdom* will be held on Wednesday, January 31, 2007, from 9:30 AM to 1:00 PM, with a gallery walk-through at 10:00 AM led by exhibition curator Dr. Joanna Williams. Complimentary refreshments will be served. Please RSVP to pr@asianart.org or call (415) 581-3712.

Exhibition publication:

Kingdom of the Sun: Indian Court and Village Art from the Princely State of Mewar. This major catalogue, edited by exhibition curator Joanna Williams of the University of California, Berkeley, and produced by the Asian Art Museum to accompany the exhibition *Princes, Palaces, and Passion*, includes five original essays by leading scholars as well as detailed entries on each of the objects in the exhibition. Containing 170 full-color illustrations as well as a glossary, a bibliography, and an index, this book provides an authoritative overview of the varied arts of Mewar. 8½ x 12 in., 240 pp., paperback, 170 illus., glossary, bibliography, index, est. price \$40 (inquire at shop@asianart.org).

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About the Asian Art Museum

The Asian Art Museum is a public institution whose mission is to lead a diverse global audience in discovering the unique material, aesthetic, and intellectual achievements of Asian art and culture. Holding nearly 16,000 Asian art treasures spanning 6,000 years of history, the museum is one of the largest museums in the Western world devoted exclusively to Asian art. Once located in Golden Gate Park, the museum now resides at its new, expanded facility at Civic Center Plaza. An architectural gem featuring a dynamic blend of beaux arts and modern design elements, the museum's new home is the result of a dramatic transformation of San Francisco's former main library building by renowned architect Gae Aulenti (designer of Paris's Musée d'Orsay) into a showcase for the museum's acclaimed collection and exhibitions.

- **Information:** (415) 581-3500, or www.asianart.org.
- **Location:** 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102.

- **Hours:** The museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm, with extended hours until 9:00 pm every Thursday.
- **Admission:** \$12 for adults, \$8 for seniors, \$7 for youth 13–17, and free for children under 12. Thursday evenings after 5 pm admission is just \$5 for all visitors except those under 12 and members, who are always free. **Target Tuesdays:** The museum offers FREE admission to all on the **first Tuesday** of every month, courtesy of Target Stores
- **Access:** The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access, please call (415) 581-3598; TDD: (415) 861-2035.

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