

Lahori Painting in the 18th Century (Part I of 2)

Introduction

Some years back, while carrying out research at the Lahore Museum in Pakistan, I chanced upon a delicate series of drawings depicting Muslim saints. These previously unknown drawings sit between two styles, paintings from the Punjab Hills known as “Pahari” painting, and paintings from the Punjab plains from the first half of the nineteenth century made during the Sikh period. What piqued my interest in this series was not just the skill of the *ustād* (master) responsible for the portraits but also its unusual theme. It is extremely rare to come across a near-complete set of drawings based on the theme of Sufi portraits. Where was this series made? Who made it? And when was it completed? As I realized pretty quickly, coming close to answering these questions has been no easy task. The series lies torn between two museums across divided Punjab: the Lahore Museum in Pakistani Punjab and the Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, in Indian Punjab. In Part 1 of a two-part essay, I will primarily focus on paintings from the Lahore Museum. In Part 2, I intend to put the divided collection together virtually, and discuss the series more holistically, focusing primarily on the theme of this series.

As a Pakistani scholar of pre-partition South Asian art history, getting access to Indian repositories is tricky given the political tensions between the two countries and the increasingly extreme stance assumed by the present Indian government towards not only Pakistanis, but towards Muslims and Hindustan’s Islamic history in general. In fact, this polarization speaks of a landscape whose literal division has deeply affected historiography. The political scission separating the modern nations of India and Pakistan over the last seven decades has led to divisive scholarly trends that frustrate holistic approaches to studying the devotional and artistic cultures of northwestern Hindustan.



Figure 1: British Indian Empire 1909. Imperial Gazetteer of India. Wikimedia Commons.

In the humanities in general but specifically in art history, the region is increasingly viewed through a lens in which the subcontinent is conflated with a post-colonial, post-Partition, modern India. From a cultural and linguistic perspective, Hindi and Sanskrit come to represent India and Hinduism, while Urdu and Persian are seen as representing all things Muslim and Pakistani, and therefore somehow foreign to the region and its history. Sources written in Persian/Urdu scripts, as well as the subcontinent's Persianate literary and devotional cultural expressions—such as this illustrated Akbar-period manuscript of the *Harivamsa*—refuse to sit comfortably in this shrinking

matrix.



Figure 2: Krishna Holds Up Mount Govardhan to Shelter the Villagers of Braj, Folio from a *Harivamsa*, Akbar period, 1590-95, made in Lahore, MET Museum, New York (28.63.1). Open Access, image in the public domain

And given India's political alliance with western nations, it has always had an upper hand in the culture wars between the two countries. It is understandable that in art history as well, while most literature has highlighted premodern South Asian art, the focus—apart from Gandharan sculpture—has been primarily in the regions that today lie within modern India. As we see in maps that often accompany art historical surveys of premodern Hindustan, the region that is today Pakistan is carefully relegated from narratives of South Asian art history.

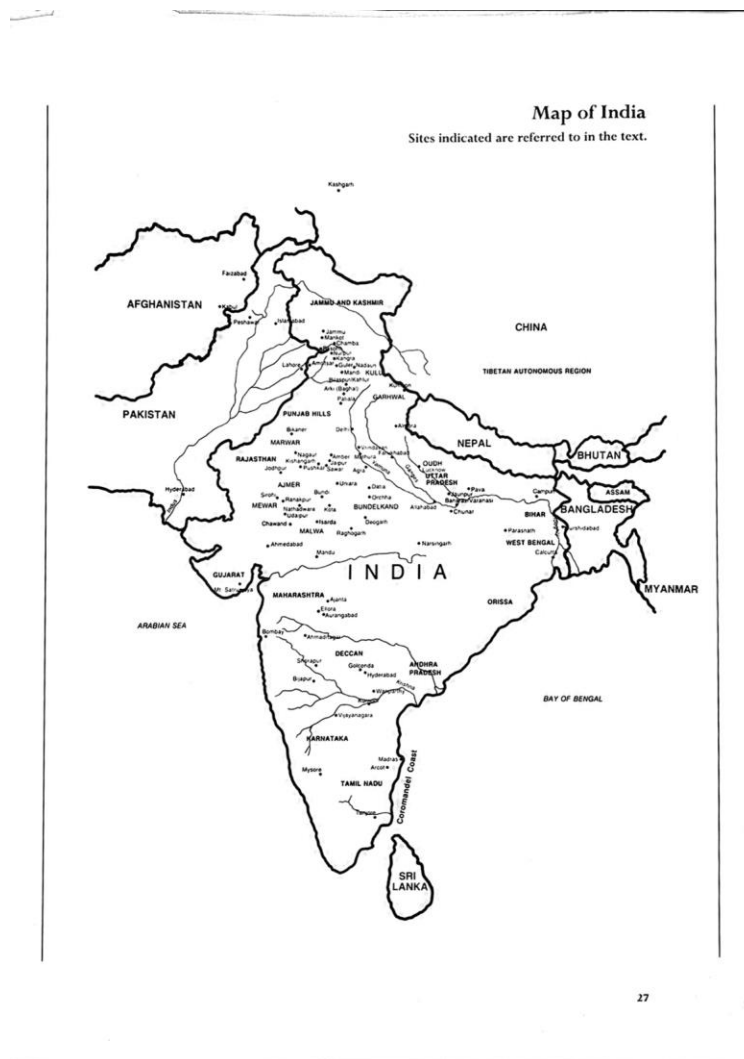


Figure 3: Map from *Realms of Heroism: Indian Paintings at the Brooklyn Museum* (Brooklyn Museum, 1994)

A Collection Divided

In 1947, at the time of partition it was decided that the collections of *the* central museum of the region—the Lahore Museum—would also be partitioned between the two countries (**Fig. 4**). This micro-partition was as haphazard and vindictive as the macro-partition. According to Shaila Bhatti, “the task of assessing the actual basis of division is not easy; official documentation relating to the transfer of objects is scant, and none is available in the archival institutions of Lahore. Even the museum is unclear about which objects went to India”.¹ According to verbal accounts from museum staff, forty percent of the collection went to Chandigarh; and this meant that forty percent of each individual series had to be partitioned. In the diagram shown in **Figure 5**, the blue squares are for the drawings in Lahore and the red are for Chandigarh. As can be seen, the division does fall along the 60/40 division. I have been able to document all the drawings from Lahore, but have yet to document all the ones in Chandigarh.

¹ Bhatti, Shaila. *Translating Museums: A Counterhistory of South Asian Museology*. Critical Cultural Heritage Series / Ucl Institute of Archaeology Publications, V. 9. London: Routledge, 2016.

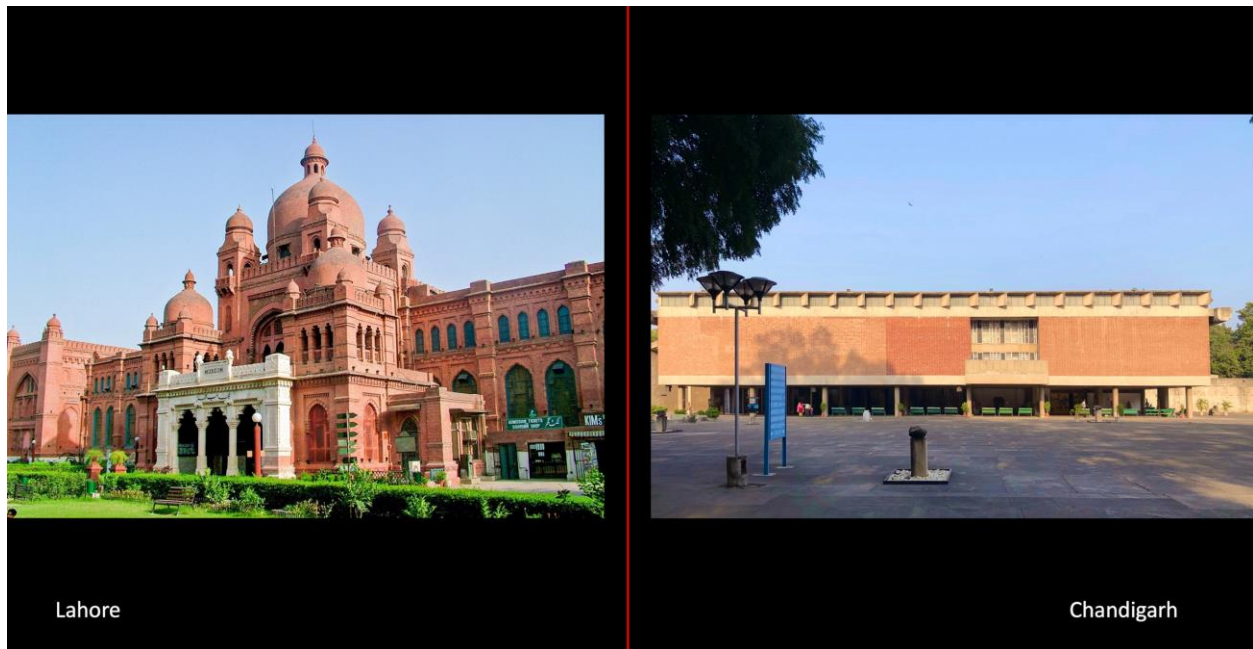


Figure 4: Lahore Museum (left) and Chandigarh Museum and Art Gallery (right)



Figure 5: Diagram showing the division of artworks from the series between Lahore and Chandigarh

The Drawing Series

Apart from three, all the drawings are numbered in both Arabic numerals and in Devanagari (I have yet to place the nagari numerals in a sequence). The last Arabic number is 49. The folios are all small in size. The largest (**Fig. 6**) is 16 x 7cm and the smallest (**Fig. 7**) is 8 x 7cm. The drawings are made on unprepared, single sheets of extremely thin paper. It is thin enough that the artist could even have traced these drawings from some other collection, or from his own sketches. Extremely thin under-drawing lines are occasionally visible underneath the bolder outlines made in carbon black ink (**Fig. 8**). Other pigments are used extremely sparingly, and only in thin, transparent washes. Opaque white is the only pigment used regularly.



Figure 6: Mehtar Ilyas. Numbered 24. approx 16x7cm. Lahore Museum (A-758)

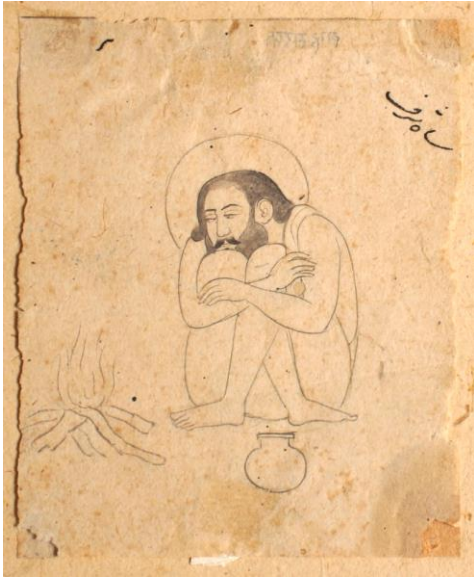


Figure 7 (left): Shah Sharaf. Numbered 2. appx 8x7cm. Lahore Museum (F-10)



Figure 8: Nizam Leher-Beher (detail). Numbered 4. Lahore Museum (A-717)

There is ample evidence to show that these drawings were used as the basis for complete paintings that were most likely made for an album of saints (**Figures 7 and 8**). Today the completed paintings lie dispersed in collections across the world. Mapping this dispersal itself speaks of the interconnectedness of artistic networks: for instance, how did paintings from this workshop reach as far as Patna or Paris? The presence of these paintings in albums that were compiled in different regions of South Asia speaks of itinerant artists traveling in search of patronage during the volatile period of the eighteenth century with master-drawings or tracings of these drawings in hand.

But before we compare the drawings with the completed paintings, it is necessary to surmise the context that these drawings might have been made in, which is what the present paper focuses on. Several elements, both in the folios and in their archiving, speak of how these tiny artworks disturb the notion of a neat and clean partition. The drawings disrupt a nationalist

narrative that is all too often projected onto the past, and they disrupt the Hindu vs. Muslim divide, while frustrating clear regional divisions, such as between eastern Punjab and western Punjab or between the Pahari region and the Punjab plains. Each folio has labels identifying the saint depicted both in Arabic and in Devanagari. The names in Devanagari are in the back, as is the nagari numbering when visible (**Figures 9 and 10**).

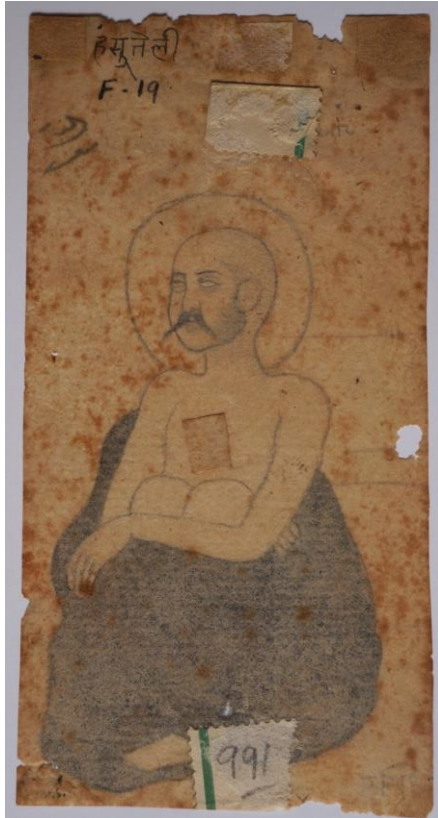


Figure 9: Hassu Teli (verso). Numbered 34. Lahore Museum (F-19)

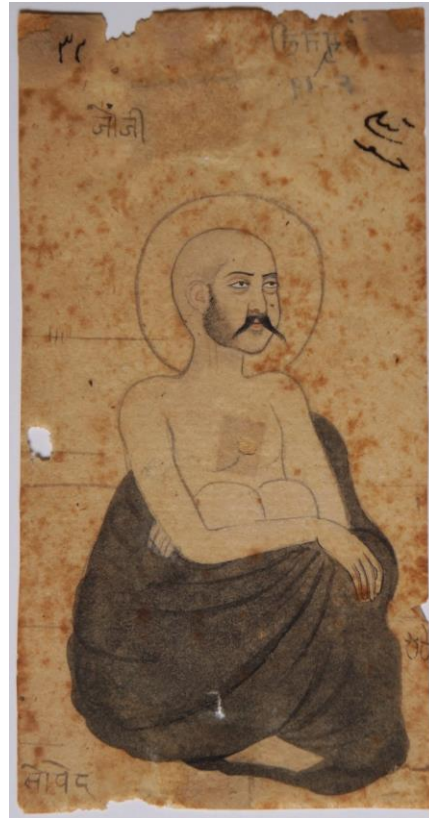


Figure 10: Hassu Teli (recto). Numbered 34. Lahore Museum (F-19)

The names in Arabic are always on the front top-right or left of the figures. Intriguingly, all the drawings have instructions on the front, written in Hindi, telling which color to apply in which sections. In the portrait of Nizam Leher-Beher, numbered 4 in Arabic, we see “khākī” for the saint’s jama, “sohnā” or gold for the bolster, “safaid” or white for the foreground, and “jo-jī” or

“whatever” for the background (Fig. 11).

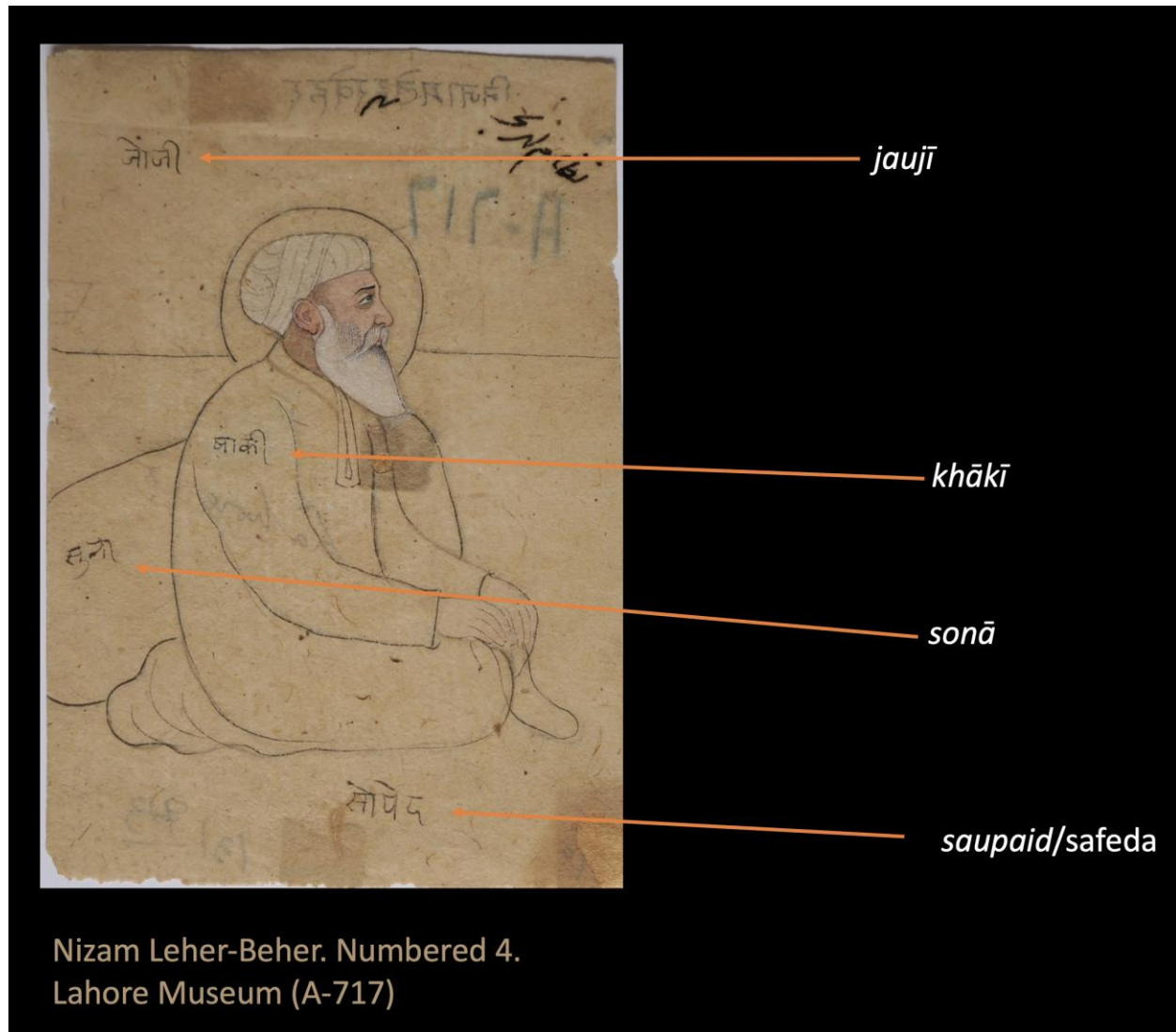


Figure 11: Nizam Leher-Beher. Numbered 4. Lahore Museum (A-717)

From the inscriptional evidence an artist-patron dynamic begins to emerge. It appears that the artist and his family workshop where these drawings were made were not readers of Persian and might not have been conversant in this language of the elite.² The patrons however, appear to be Persian

² Ample research has shown that by the early modern period, painting in South Asia, apart from elite Mughal patronage, was made in family-based workshops. For example, see B.N. Goswamy, “Pahari Painting: The Family as the Basis of Style,” *Marg* Vol. 21 Issue no. 4 (1968): 17-62.

speaking. As I have discussed elsewhere, most paintings of Sufi saints in South Asia are accompanied with Persian labels.³ Given the subject matter, we can say with confidence that the patron was a Muslim, most likely a Sufi or a follower of Sufis, while the artists were part of a family workshop. It appears that the *ustād* responsible for these drawings wrote—or asked someone to write—the Devanagari instructions for junior artists working under him, who would then trace these master-drawings onto the final prepared paper—known as *vasli*—and fill the outlines with flat washes (**Figures 12 and 13**).

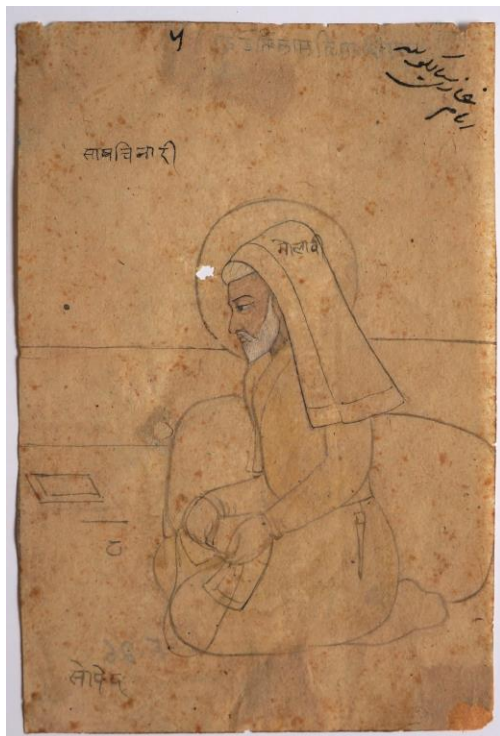


Figure 12: Imam Bukhari Sialkotia. Numbered 6. Lahore Museum (F-26)



Figure 13: Imam Bukhari, Princeton University Art Museum. (y1980-53)⁴

³ Murad Khan Mumtaz, *Faces of God: Images of Devotion in Indo-Muslim Painting, 1500—1800* (Leiden: Brill, 2023).

⁴ <<https://static.artmuseum.princeton.edu/mirador3/?manifest=https://data.artmuseum.princeton.edu/iiif/objects/54475&canvas=https://data.artmuseum.princeton.edu/iiif/objects/54475/canvas/54475-canvas-115445>>

Where do we Place the Drawings Stylistically?

Majority of art history focusing on Rajput painting—specifically Pahari painting—has been concerned with connecting specific artworks to particular regions. As mentioned earlier, most of the literature neglects regions of Punjab that are now in Pakistan, therefore projecting present-day political divisions onto the past. Lahore, one of the greatest political and cultural centers of pre-partition Hindustan, hardly ever gets mentioned. Apart from the Ranjit Singh and colonial periods of the nineteenth century, there is no focused survey on the region as a center for painting. With most scholarship privileging areas partitioned to modern India, any series of painting or individual artworks are assigned to regions that fall into present-day India. Even though, in his 1976 catalogue of Pahari paintings and Sikh portraits from the Lahore Museum, Fakir Aijazuddin attributes the saints' drawings to the Sikh period in Lahore and dates them to the mid-nineteenth century, the Chandigarh Museum entry places them in the Pahari region of Guler—one of the prized centers of painting in the second half of the 18th century and importantly in present-day India—and dates them to circa 1760. Each country wants to claim these drawings for their own, altering the dates of production accordingly.

Stylistically speaking the drawings hover between both regions. In fact, a closer analysis puts into doubt the very existence of regional schools of painting: a taxonomy created by scholars yet hardly ever used by artists themselves, since styles were more closely linked to families and not places. For instance, the Sufi drawings share the convention of writing down painting instructions in Devanagari on incomplete drawings with Pahari painting from the first half of the 19th century. Comparative stylistic analysis of the saints drawing series also draws similarities with eighteenth-century Pahari painting. On the left is a folio from the Gita Govinda ascribed to the Pahari painter Manaku (**Fig. 14**). The figure of Nanda and the lower-left *gopala* bears some

stylistic resemblance to the two saints shown in **Figures 15 and 16**, of the drawing series. Some similarities include the bold outlines of the strict profiles, the slender, curving fingers, the structures of the eyes, and the overall curvilinear form of the bodies.



Figure 14: Folio from the *Gita Govinda* (detail), Basohli region, 1730 CE, by Manaku. Lahore Museum (1-119)



Figure 15: Lal Hussain Lahori (detail). Numbered 34. Lahore Museum (A-575)

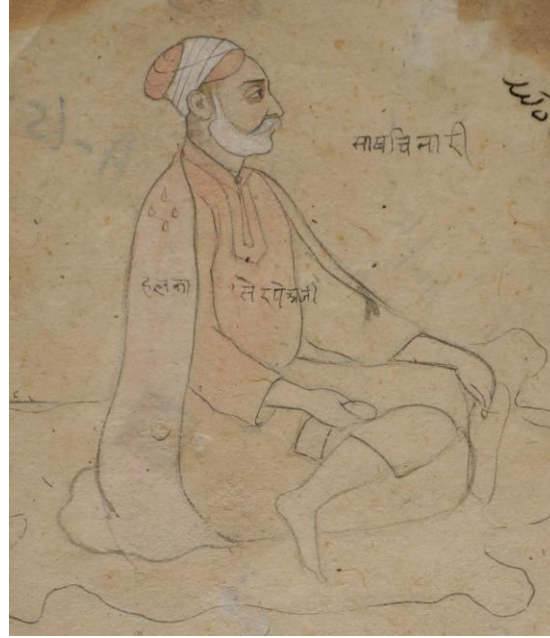


Figure 16: Shah Gada. Numbered 42. Lahore Museum (A-657)

Yet, there are also clear similarities with paintings more likely to have been made in the Punjab plains, for examples this Sikh period depiction of Guru Nanak with bhai Mardana from the Museum Rietberg (**Fig. 17**). In the details we can see similarities between the turban types worn by Bhai Mardana and Shah Abdul Mu'ali in **Figure 18**. The stylized, petal-like hands with pointed fingers are also similar, as are the mouse-like round ears that all the figures in the Lahori saints sereis share.

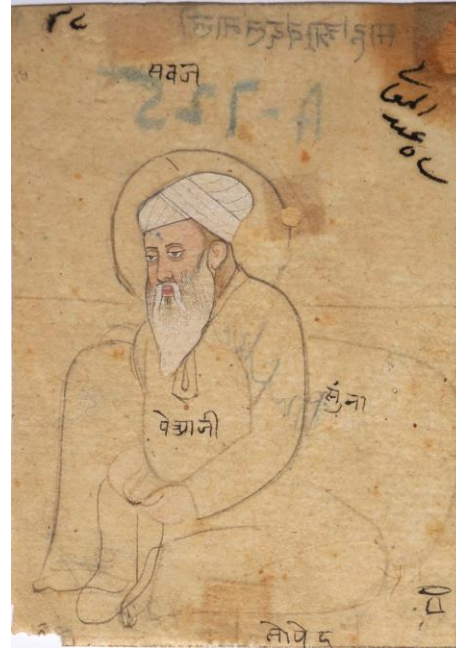


Figure 17: Guru Nanak, first Sikh guru, with musician. Folio from a series about the founders of the Sikh religion. Pahari region or Panjab plain? 1830. Museum Rietberg

Figure 18: Shah Abdul Mu'ali, numbered 37, Lahore Museum (A-725)

Is there, then, a case to be made for “Pahari” painters working in Lahore in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? Thematically speaking, the series is likely to have been made in Lahore, since the drawings include several saints who are known among Lahoris, but to this day are hardly known beyond the immediate region, such as Hassu Teli, Shah Hussain, Shah Abu'l Mu'ali, among others. Furthermore, there is ample historical and visual evidence to suggest that there was regular interaction between the hills and the plains in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For example, a small drawing of six portraits from the collection of the Lahore Museum, is made in a distinctively Guler style of Pahari painting, yet features prominent noblemen from the Lahore region (**Fig. 19**). Some notable figures include Mir Momin who in the 1740s briefly served as the deputy minister of Lahore under the Mughals, and Adina Beg, hailing from rural Lahore but in the mid-eighteenth century rose up the ranks to become the undisputed ruler of greater Punjab with the help of alliances with the hill rajas.



Figure 19: Clockwise from top right: Adina Beg, Momin, Jagatrup, Puran, Ratan, Bhup Chand (?), ca. 1755-75. 10 x 11.4 cm. Lahore Museum (A-655)

It is thus no coincidence that he was depicted by artists working in both the Punjab hills and the Punjab plains (**Figures 20 and 21**).

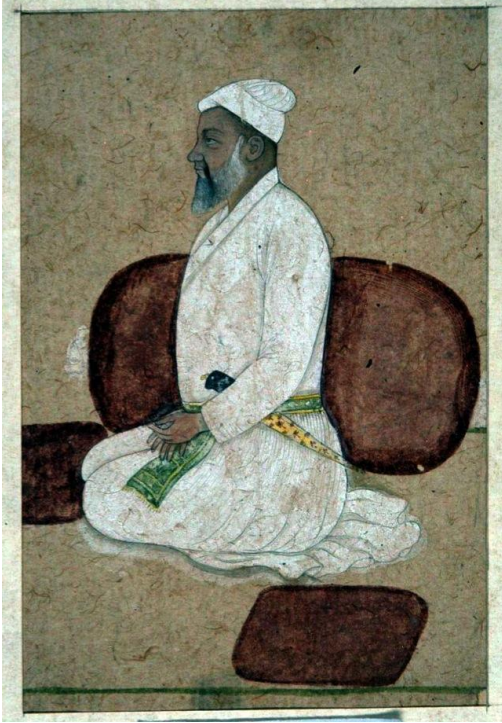


Figure 20: Adina Beg Khan, c. 1780. 14.6 x 10 cm. Late-Mughal style of Lahore. Lahore Museum (B-54)

Figure 21: Adina Beg, ca. 1820. Sikh period. Lahore Museum (A-311)

Another important individual who comes up in Punjabi painting from this period is Moin ul-Mulk Mir Mannu, the Mughal governor of Multan and Lahore between 1748 and 1753. One important portrait depicting Mir Mannu is in the Lahore Museum, and is made in the style of the Seu family, made famous by the scholarship of B.N. Goswamy and Eberhard Fischer in recent times (**Fig. 21**).⁵ A painting made by the much-loved painter from Jammu, Nainsukh, includes a *takri* inscription that mentions Mir Mannu by name, again showing the interconnectedness of the entire region or pre-partition Punjab. The painting was originally part of the Lahore Museum collection, but had been housed at the National Museum, Karachi since 1950. It's current location is unfortunately unknown.

⁵ B. N. Goswamy, *Nainsukh of Guler: A Great Indian Painter from a Small Hill-State* (Zurich, Switzerland: Artibus Asiae : Museum Rietberg, 1997).



Figure 21: Raja Balwant Singh of Jasrota listening to music. 1748CE. By Nainsukh of Guler (formerly collection of the Lahore Museum. Current location unknown). The inscription mentions the victory of Mannu, the Mughal governor of Lahore.

Conclusion

Keeping stylistic and thematic considerations in mind, this group of drawings divided among the Lahore and Chandigarh museums, opens up a complex network of questions regarding cultural and political interactions between the Punjab hills and the Punjab plains during the eighteenth century. Art historians tend to follow divisions created by modern historiography, and rather than acknowledging the porous cultural framework of pre-colonial South Asia, view these two regions as distinct cultural zones. By providing a visual and historical context for this series of drawings from Punjab, this short essay is a first, small attempt to offer a corrective to scholarly pitfalls.

Having stylistically established the probability that the drawings were made in Lahore, or for a Lahori patron, in Part 2 I intend to focus on the saints depicted in the series, and what their presence might tell us about artistic and patronly choices. Once I have identified the remaining drawings from Chandigarh, it is my intention to virtually reassemble the series according to its original numbering. Once reassembled, I will then be able to fully make a comparison of this series with other known series of Sufi saints made during this period in South Asia.