



A Lady Looks into the Mirror on a White Terrace

From a Ragamala series

Provincial Mughal, India, Late 18th century

27cm high, 18.2cm wide

Provenance: Private European Collection, exhibited in Paris, 1973

A lady rests against the backdrop of a white stone terrace and occupies the centre of the composition; she leans against a bed, decorated with gold panels, green and orange flowers and covered with magenta-coloured cushions. She is looking at herself in a tiny mirror inlaid in her thumb ring, perhaps in order to apply make-up or jewellery with her right hand. She, like her maidens, is dressed in a long transparent dress (choli) and veil (dupatta). Her attendants clasp many beautiful objects that often appear in Mughal painting, such as a teacup and saucer, a musical instrument and a pandan-shaped box. The pulled-up canopy on the right depicts a Mughal luxury textile, while the motifs seen on their textiles and costumes are also typical of the period. The entire scene is set within a palace, and, in the background, the artist has denoted the landscape with a dark expanse and some greenery. One attendant stands at the back and holds a fan made of peacock feathers over her right shoulder. In ragamala paintings the peacock frequently allegorizes an absent lover.

A raga (melody) is a style of Indian music, consisting of five, six or seven notes distributed over the octave scale in a particular arrangement. The paintings are illustrations of poems, which visually convey the mood of Raga music and each raga is usually personified by a hero and a heroine (nayaka and nayika), together with specific Hindu deities attached with the raga (Pratapaditya, p. 7). The act of a lady looking in a mirror and applying make-up or wearing jewelry is a popular scene in Mughal

ragamala paintings, and in particular the scene evokes the story of the Vilavala Ragini.

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, possesses an 18th century Vilavala Ragini painting, which is attributed to Bundi, Rajasthan (Accession Number 67.798). Although stylistically divergent to our example, it appears related in its iconography, and offers an example of a typical composition of this story: a lady sits amongst her maidens on a terrace and for the purpose of meeting her beloved she is putting on her jewels. However, unlike the Boston example, the elongated figures of the maidens, coupled with their fine facial features, small rosebud lips, and shading around their hair and jawlines, is illustrative of provincial Mughal painting of the late 18th century (Losty, p. 83). The painting typifies the proclivity 18th century artists seem to exhibit for illustrating either Hindu or Islamic sources.

Literature:

Pratapaditya, P. Ragamala Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, The Meriden Gravure Co., 1969.

Losty, J.P. 'Painting at Murshidabad 1750-1820', in, N. Das and R. Lleewlyn-Jones, (eds.), Murshidabad: Forgotten Capital of Bengal, Mumbai, Marg, 2013, pp. 82-105.