

## 2. Reading Pictures: Towards a Synoptic Reading Combining Textual and Art Historical Approaches

**Abstract.** This paper argues for an interdisciplinary approach to bhakti studies, taking into account visual sources as part of the reception history of bhakti texts. It presents a case study of Kishangarhi miniatures, focusing on the work of Sāvant Singh of Kishangarh, alias Nāgarīdās, the eighteenth-century poet–prince who sponsored several paintings as illustrations of his own work. It pays special attention to his relationship with his muse and concubine nicknamed Banī-thanī and includes evidence from depictions of Laylā and Majnūn.

**Keywords.** Poetry–illustrations, Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa bhakti, Kishangarh painting, Banī-thanī, Laylā–Majnūn.

This chapter studies the interface between painting and poetry.\* Far too often art historians operate without a careful reading of the texts their paintings illustrate and textual scholars neglect the illustrated versions of their texts. This is a pity since we can learn from each other’s approaches. To understand bhakti poetry we take into account written commentaries, but we should not neglect the images that form another part of our poems’ reception history. Few scholars have tried to bridge the disciplines, notably J. Williams and V. Desai in art history and J. Hawley in religious studies.<sup>1</sup> Their promising work should inspire us to follow in their footsteps and work towards greater symbiosis between the two scholarly communities.

This chapter attempts to do so by means of a case study. The school of Kishangarhi paintings lends itself perfectly to the task, since several paintings are known to have been produced to illustrate literary texts. This is the case for some of the most famous paintings, which are inscribed with the relevant bhakti texts on the reverse.

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<sup>1</sup> Desai (1984); Hawley (1994) and in this volume, Williams (1996). See also Cattoni (2015).

The main sponsor of Kishangarhi painting during the heyday of the atelier from the 1720s through the 1740s was Sāvant Singh (1699–1764). Under the pen name Nāgarīdās, he wrote mostly devotional poetry in Brajbhāṣā, but also some Rekhtā (early Urdu) poetry. It is well known that some of his Braj poems have been illustrated by the famous Kishangarhi artist Nihālcand (c. 1710–1782), yet very few of the paintings have been seriously studied in conjunction with the poems. No scholarly attention at all has been paid to the illustrations of his Rekhtā poetry. This article seeks to demonstrate that a synoptic reading of poetry and paintings brings new perspectives to both art and literature.

While the intense collaboration at Kishangarh between patron and painter is not unusual,<sup>2</sup> the unprecedented characteristic of Nihālcand and Sāvant Singh's symbiotic relationship is that the painter illustrated his patron's own poems—not illustrations of a whole work but of one or two selected poems at a time. This seems unique. To date, at least four such paintings have come to light that are inscribed with the patron's devotional songs featuring Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa's intimate embrace.

The most spectacular of these paintings is the famous *Boat of Love*.<sup>3</sup> It is generally reckoned to be one of Nihālcand's masterpieces, attributed to his glory period (Haidar dates it to c. 1731–1735).<sup>4</sup> The theme of this work is the royal pastime of boating, or *naukā vihāra*, which seems to have been popular in Kishangarh with its beautiful Gundalao Lake. The painting is an illustration of Nāgarīdās's extended work *Bihār-candrikā* (hereafter BC), or *Moonlight-Play*, which is dated 1731 CE,<sup>5</sup> of which there are some selected verses on the reverse.<sup>6</sup>

Structurally, poem and painting are alike; one could say, composed in three movements, depicted on three planes respectively. At the top of the painting we see a miniature Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa seated on a hillock. This corresponds to the first part of the poem where Kṛṣṇa calls the *gopī* with his flute play (BC 5–18) and, together with Rādhā, the women assemble on Govardhan where they sing and dance in the bowers near the river (BC 19–23). They then proceed to the river Yamunā to go boating (BC 24–43), a scene that is depicted in the middle of the painting. The divine couple here are distinguished by halos and accompanied by eight female

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2 Cf. that of the Mughal emperor Muḥammad Shāh with his artist Citarman II, see McInerney (2011).

3 In the National Museum in Delhi; see Dickinson and Khandalavala (1959), plate 9; Mathur (2000), plate 4; Haidar (2011b), p. 598, Fig. 1.

4 Haidar (2004), pp. 122–123.

5 1788 VS; text Khān (1974), pp. 155–167.

6 Dickinson and Khandalavala (1959), p. 36 give some verses in translation that seem to match selections from the beginning and throughout the work. Since the National Museum does not allow inspection of the reverse, I was not able to independently verify. See also Haidar (1995), p. 115 n. 53.

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attendants (*sakhī*), conforming to the *aṣṭa-sakhī* convention of Rādhā–Kṛṣṇa mythology. At the end of the delightful boating trip the couple alights on the banks, the scene depicted at the bottom of the painting.<sup>7</sup>

I have elsewhere suggested that *Bihār-candrikā* contains an allusion to Sāvant Singh's then new mistress, nicknamed Banī-ṭhanī (or 'Miss Make-up').<sup>8</sup> The poem contains a loving description of a 'new' *sākhī*, the beautifully 'made-up' oarswoman, clad in a gorgeous diaphanous white dress (BC 28–30).<sup>9</sup> In the painting, neither of the attendants who row the boat wears white, yet Rādhā does. It appears then that the painter has deliberately gone a step further by not just painting Banī-ṭhanī into the mythical world of Kṛṣṇa, but even upgrading her to Rādhā's position. It is only by reading the painting and poem together that we can uncover this little inside joke, a *līlā* in its own right.

There is another painting in the Durbar collection that features a lady in white. This is a seasonal one, called *Night of Lamps* or *Dīpāvālikā* (plate 8),<sup>10</sup> and has been estimated to date from c. 1735–1740 CE. The lady is very prominently depicted in the centre of the lower half of the painting. In her elegant, white diaphanous dress, bordered with gold brocade, she answers the description of the new *sākhī* from *Bihār-candrikā*. In this case though, the lady in white is totally absent from the poem quoted on the reverse:

*sundara sugghara syāma rādhā ṭhakurāyana jū  
jorī jaga bhūṣana su ānanda agamagī  
tāraṣaṣī basana javāhira kī jeba lasī  
baiṭhe kurasī paī prīta nautana sagamagī  
jarabaphabṭī simayānē samaidāna kista soja  
nāgara agara dhūmi dhūndhari ragamagī  
dīpai dīpamāla chabi chūṭai agna jantra jāla  
ajaba jalūsa joti jīnata jagamagī*

(*Dīp-mālikotsav* 3, *Utsav-mālā* 106, Gupta (1965),  
p. 1.159; Dickinson and Khandalavala (1959), p. 40)

Handsome noble Śyāma, together with his lady Rādhā—  
Jewels of the world—dazzlingly joyous.<sup>11</sup>  
Brocade garments, splendid ornaments, elegantly<sup>12</sup>  
Enthroned with his tender darling.

7 This does not correspond closely to the text of the poem, where Rādhā changes clothes and then is led to meet Kṛṣṇa in an upstairs room (*aṭā*), where they make love (BC 44–48).

8 Pauwels (2005).

9 Gupta (1965), p. 2.248.

10 Dickinson and Khandalavala (1959), pp. 40–41, plate xi.

11 Gupta glosses *agamagī* as *āpūrṇa* and in the next line *sagamagī* as *paripūrṇa*.

12 The Persian *zeb* can be an adjective, meaning 'adorning,' 'imparting grace' (Platts).

Under the embroidered<sup>13</sup> awning, lampholder close by,<sup>14</sup>  
[Says] Nāgar, the smoke of the incense wafts around them.  
By the light of the oil lamps, fireworks erupt, weaving shapes—  
Wondrous splendor of sparkling streamers of light.

The poem's central vignette is the scene of the two lovers under the awning. In the painting this is embedded within a larger Diwali tableau, which, as in *The Boat of Love*, is structured on three planes: a miniature divine pair at the top, the central vignette of the couple under the awning, and the entertainers at the bottom. Again, the painter adds the eight ladies-in-waiting (*aṣṭa-sakhī*), here holding musical instruments and fire sparklers. However, he foregrounds most prominently the lady in white, a ninth *sakhī*, depicted in dramatic position on a balcony. As in *The Boat of Love*, this lady in white too may well be intended to represent Banī-ṭhanī; she certainly shows the features of a prominent nose, elongated eyes, and arched brows ascribed to the young girl. She is entertaining the divine pair, which would conform to Banī-ṭhanī's real-life role as a performer.

A similar structural addition to the poem is found in another painting in the Durbar Collection, attributed to Nihālcand, *The Pavilion in the Grove* (dated c. 1745–48).<sup>15</sup> This one is inscribed with a poem from Nāgarīdās's work *Braj-sār* (hereafter BS) or *Essence of Braj* (1742 CE). This is a poetic handbook that alternates *dohā* to introduce the poetical theme, with *kavitta* that give poetic examples. The poem inscribed in the painting comes as an example under the heading, 'The description of placing betel on the beloved's lotus mouth after love play' (*siṅgārāntara priyā mukha kamala bīrī daīna barnā*):

*tīya siṅgāra piya pāna daī, citāi kari bhuva bhaṅga*  
*bīrī nīrī hū na gaī, bhaī nainani gati paṅga*

*nāgarī navala guna āgarī raṅgīlī jāko*  
*bārhyo haī prakāsa mukha canda kuñja bhaūna maī*  
*bānkī bhauhaī bare naina kahata banai na chabi*  
*rahyo haī sarasa raṅga barasa citauna maī*  
*cahaī sukhadaina mukha daīna bīrī pyārī jū kaī*  
*pai na calaī kara uta rūpa sarasaūna maī*  
*saki jāta caki jāta chaki chaki jāta lāla*  
*sithala hvai gāta jāta bhaūha bhaṅga haūna maī*  
(BS 30–31, Gupta (1965), p. 2.238)

13 *Jarabaphta*, meaning 'embroidered fabric,' is attested in HŚS.

14 *Soj* (adj.) for *sojh*: 'straight,' 'direct,' 'near,' 'close' (Platts). *Samaidān* is *shama* 'dān,' 'chandelier.'

15 Dickinson and Khandalavala (1959), pp. 44–45, plate xiii.

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The lover in love-play offers betel to his lady. She looks at him, raising a brow.  
The betel stops mid-air, its gait lamed by her eyes.

A tender young girl—sophisticated, passionate—  
As her face lights up, the moon illuminates the pavilion.  
Large eyes under arched brows, her beauty defies words:  
Sweet passion drizzles in her glances.  
To please her, he lifts his hand to place betel in his darling’s mouth,  
But stops mid-gesture, arrested by her charming beauty.<sup>16</sup>  
The lover, mesmerized, savors to the full this moment,  
Captured just by the flexing of the arch of her brow.<sup>17</sup>

This vignette is a manierist character piece describing a conventional scene, a moment in the after-play (*suratānta*). The painting provides an entry into this intimate moment via the device of the ladies-in-waiting, of which again eight are depicted. Two of the girls to the left of the divine couple are lingering behind a pillar, engaged in a lively verbal exchange, presumably the poem itself, recited to enhance the pleasure of the lovers. It becomes truly a moment out of time for the viewer to savor, just as Kṛṣṇa is savoring the sight of Rādhā’s beauty. The voyeuristic delight is further enhanced by the depiction of the lovers with their back to the viewer, turned to each other in profile. Nihālcand, by adding this frame, has succeeded to great effect in breaking the objectifying distance of the *rīti* work. He has done more than illustrate his patron’s poem, succeeding in significantly enhancing the overall aesthetic experience. The painting makes the poem come to life in extraordinary ways.<sup>18</sup>

Another famous painting attributed to Nihālcand is *The Bower of Quiet Passion* or *Nikuñj līlā* preserved in the San Diego Museum of Art and dated 1740–45.<sup>19</sup> This is inscribed in the back with a poem that can be identified as a *caupāī* from Nāgarīdās’s *Bhor-līlā*, or *The Morning After* (written before 1723 or 1780 VS):

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16 Literally: ‘But his hand can’t move there, in her charming beauty.’ I interpret *sarasaūna* as a rhyme word derived from *sarasa*, in a causative sense, because the adjective *sarasaūhā* is attested in that meaning in BBSK.

17 Literally: ‘His body is frozen (has become cool) in the arching of her brow.’

18 A very similar technique is used in a painting now in a private collection in Switzerland where the painter (possibly Nihālcand’s son Sītārām) illustrates a *Bhor-līlā* poem on Kṛṣṇa’s dressing Rādhā’s hair (Losty (2012), p. 96). Here, too, the eight ladies-in-waiting seem to be commenting on the lovers’ action.

19 Reproduced in Haidar (2011b), p. 600, Fig. 3, text 606 n. 19, translation 601. See also Welch (1963), pp. 58–59 n. 29, Randhawa and Randhawa (1980), p. 28, plate viii, Haidar (1995), pp. 133–134.

*ihī vidhī kari suṣa saīna, caīna juta vitāī rajanī  
bhaī bhuraharī bera jāni, juri āī sajanī  
laikaī ru bīna prabīna, lalita lalitā ju bajāyau  
adbhuta rāga bibhāsa, kuñja mandira bica chāyau  
cahacahāṭa panchīna kīyau, suṣa samaī suhāvana  
sītala pavana parāga, kāvala jala para parasata āvana*

(*Bhor-līlā* 4, Gupta (1965), p. 2.254)

The night passed delightfully in such joyous love-making.  
When dawn came,<sup>20</sup> the maidens gathered to alert [the lovers].  
They brought a veena, which skillful Lalitā played lovingly.<sup>21</sup>  
Wondrous raga *vibhāsa* echoed in the bower,  
As birds warbled—a moment of sheer bliss,  
Cooled by a breeze from the water, fragrant with lotus pollen.

The painting with its dense foliage conveys vividly the intimacy of the bower where Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa are lying entwined on a bed of flower petals. This time the painter is following the poem's lead in depicting the *sakhīs*, including one holding a veena. One *sakhī* is shown bending over to pick lotuses from the river, a clever visual device to suggest the lotus-pollen-perfumed breeze of the poem.

Fascinatingly, there is an uncompleted sketch from the Porret collection that seems to be a pre-study for this painting.<sup>22</sup> In it only one *sakhī* is depicted playing the veena, and the lotus-perfumed breeze is simply suggested by the lotuses in the river in the foreground of the picture. In this preparatory study, then, Nihālcand remained closer to the original poem. One wonders whether the painter prepared such sketches to show to his patron and discuss together. If so, it would mean that the mode of production was a collaborative process.

Other paintings of Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa *līlā* by Nihālcand may also have been inspired by Nāgarīdās's poems even if they are not inscribed. This is especially the case for seasonal pictures related to festivals that were celebrated with the recitation of poetry and songs. Just one example is *Sāñjhī līlā* from the Royal Durbar, attributed to Nihālcand at the peak of his career.<sup>23</sup> *Sāñjhī* is the autumnal North Indian festival (during the dark half of *āśvin*) when little girls get together to make flower designs

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20 The compound *bhurahare* is attested in BBSK as meaning 'early in the morning.' There may also be a pun as this also could be read as *bhura hari-ber (hari-velā)*, which can mean at once 'Hari's time' (to depart from Rādhā) and 'the divine moment,' or *Brahma-muhurt*, 'just before dawn.'

21 The repetition of *lalita lalitā* is a *yamaka*, a repetition of the same word in a different meaning. Lalita is also the name of a raga, but the next line specifies that the raga performed is *vibhāsa*.

22 Goswamy, Losty, and Seyller (2014), pp. 58–59, plate 27.

23 Dickinson and Khandalavala (1959), pp. 32–33, plate 7.

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in order to obtain a good husband.<sup>24</sup> The painting depicts the flower arrangements made by Rādhā and her friends, with Kṛṣṇa cross-dressing as a girl to gain proximity to Rādhā. Nāgarīdās has several poems on the topic. One possible match is:

*raṅga sarasānaī barasānaī bana bāga syāmā,  
khelaī sājñhī sājñha bhau sāthani siṅgāra kaī  
nūpura nināda pūra rahyau haī drumani māñjha  
jahā tahā leta kalī kusuma utāri kaī  
sāvārī navelī bāla nīla mani belī sī  
akelī phiraī bāhā jorī saṅga sukuvāri kaī  
dārihi navāvaī mili bīnāī phūla pāvaī phala  
nāgarīyā vāraī mana kautiga nihāri kaī*

(*Sājñhī ke kavitta* 1, Gupta (1965), p. 283)

With youthful zeal, the Dark Lady, in the orchards and gardens of Barsānā  
plays Sājñhī, as evening<sup>25</sup> falls, with her friends all dressed up.  
The tinkling of their anklets lingers among the trees,  
as here and there and everywhere they pick buds and flowers from on high.  
A new girl, dark of skin, like a sapphire creeper,  
roams separately, arm in arm with a[nother] young girl.  
As they join bending branches, picking flowers and fruit,  
Nāgarīyā surrenders, gazing on at the wondrous sight.

The painting shows the dark-skinned ‘girl,’ Kṛṣṇa in disguise, offering Rādhā some buds (s)he has picked. There is a grove of trees in the background and the coming of evening is suggested by the spectacular sunset. Rādhā is attended by four ladies, and Kṛṣṇa is accompanied by another four, so again the painter has added the *aṣṭa-sakhī* device, rendering it into a cultic image. Most prominent is the girlfriend in green holding a musical instrument. Should she be identified with Nāgarīyā, the *sakhī* of the last line, who surrenders in awe to the divine spectacle? She is depicted as making the gesture that goes with the words *vāraī* or *balihārī*, ‘surrender,’ which is a circular movement of the arm to avert evil from the beloved and take it upon oneself.

One conclusion one could draw is that the overlap between text and painting, even when they are explicitly associated with one another, is not perfect. Rather than a literal ‘translation’ of the words, the painting shows the painter’s creativity at work: he may inventively add elements that are not present in the poem, and at the same time, omit elements that a literal-minded illustrator might have felt compelled to include.<sup>26</sup> A similar phenomenon has also been noticed in other illustrations of Braj poetry, though in those cases, the paintings were not made for

24 Entwistle (1984) and Dasa (1996).

25 *Sājñha*, ‘evening,’ is a *yamaka*; a pun on the festival name *sājñhī*.

26 On this, see also Williams (1996), pp. 108–130.

the author of the poetry himself. We see this, for instance, in the illustrations of *Sūr-sāgar* of roughly the same period (a mid-eighteenth century manuscript from Bhārat Kalā Bhavan)<sup>27</sup> and Keśavdās's *Rasik-priyā* in its early seventeenth-century 'subimperial Mughal,' 'Malwa' (perhaps Orcha), and Mewar illustrated versions.<sup>28</sup> Desai speaks of a scale of specificity of the word-image relation that can range between more general and more specific identifiers.<sup>29</sup> She concludes that the more restricted correspondence in the case of the 'subimperial Mughal' *Rasik-priyā* may have to do with the naturalistic Mughal conventions within which the artist was working.<sup>30</sup> She also stresses the highly ornamental and descriptive, rather than narrative, nature of the *Rasik-priyā* text.<sup>31</sup> Both elements may well be applied equally to Nāgarīdās's poetry. Whereas the Mewar depictions of *Rasik-priyā* bring a dynamic element of time into play to convey the poem's action through compositional devices,<sup>32</sup> the images produced by Nihālcand are all focused on one action, taking place in one main plane (with the notable exception of *The Boat of Love*).<sup>33</sup>

The other commonality is the depiction of the eight ladies-in-waiting, or *aṣṭa-sakhī*, which lends a cultic aspect to the paintings. It has been associated with one particular sect, the Vallabha *sampradāya*, but could be more broadly related to any of the Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa sects.<sup>34</sup> Nihālcand used it as part of the device to embed the intimate scenes described in the poetry within a larger frame. It is a visual means of drawing the viewer into these private Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa moments via the *sakhī*, parallel to what the poet does in his poems. Several of the supporting characters are engaged in singing or reciting what may be imagined to be the very poetry by Nāgarīdās that Nihālcand was illustrating. The convention of bhakti poetry is that the composer writes himself into the divine happenings he is describing by taking the voice of a companion of Rādhā or Kṛṣṇa. He does so in the last couplet of the poem, where he gives his name, the so-called *chāpa*. This 'stamp' authenticates the poem as an eye-witness report, the poet implicitly claiming to partake in the events described in his divine role as handmaiden or *sakhī*. Thus, Nāgarīdās often signs as Nāgarī or Nāgarīyā, feminine forms of his name. In cases where the

27 See Hawley (1994), pp. 483–509.

28 Desai (1984), pp. 168–180, 104–120, 159–176, respectively.

29 Ibid., p. 69.

30 Ibid., p. 90.

31 Ibid., p. 91.

32 Ibid., pp. 162–173.

33 Desai (1984), pp. 137–138 also remarks on the relegation of the text to the back of the image in the later (1670s) Malwa *Rasik-priyā* set. In the case of Nāgarīdās, we can presume that the text was so well known to the patron, who was the poet himself, that there was no need to have it in the same plane as the image.

34 In fact, the Vallabhan *picchvāts* have varying numbers of *sakhīs* flanking the image. Thus, in Skelton's classic work on the topic (1973), there is only one hanging with eight *sakhīs* (plate 2); there are four *sakhīs* in plates 1, 6–7, and six in plates 3, 8–9.



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paintings single out a *sakhī* as singing or performing, one may well see this as the equivalent of the *chāpa* in the poems.

This phenomenon needs also to be seen in the context of other Kishangarh paintings where the royal family keenly wrote itself into the mythological scenes it commissioned. A good example is *Tāmbūl Sevā*, a painting depicting an intimate moment in which Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa exchange betel that was commissioned by Sāvant Singh's elder brother, Fateh Singh.<sup>35</sup> The patron appears to be the model for one of the male figures in the foreground, attired as a king, accompanied by cowherds.<sup>36</sup> Another example is a painting by the glamorous painter Bhavānīdās, *Rukmiṇī Garlands Kṛṣṇa*.<sup>37</sup> Here the whole royal family, including Sāvant Singh, is portrayed in the role of the family of the bride, welcoming Kṛṣṇa to Rukmiṇī's house. The Kishangarhi family's mythological role represents a close relationship with Rādhā and subservience to Kṛṣṇa. Such fits the poetic persona of Nāgarīdās, whose very pen name means 'Rādhā's servant,' and who often casts himself in the poetry as a companion of Rādhā. Thus, in the first half of the eighteenth century, the Kishangarh royal family had themselves portrayed by their court painters as active participants in the mythological realm.

This phenomenon is not limited to Kishangarh; we see that elsewhere in Rajasthan, too, patrons are depicted as participating in the world of the gods, or at least in theatrical performances of the myth. One example from Udaipur is *Mahārāṇā Jagat Singh Attending the Rāsīlīlā* in 1736 by Jairām.<sup>38</sup> In Kota, where the Val-labhan deity Śrī Brijanātha jī was worshiped, a painting from c. 1775 depicts Maharao Umed Singh I (r. 1771–1819) watching a Holi performance.<sup>39</sup> It was not uncommon then to depict kings as closely involved with Kṛṣṇa-related performances and to suggest identification with the characters witnessing the divine play. In several cases, such participation in the divine *līlā* is portrayed in the context of seasonal celebrations where, indeed, royal participation is desirable. Possibly this was a fad that started in the eighteenth century among Rajasthani nobility, particularly those devoted to Kṛṣṇa.<sup>40</sup>

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35 Dickinson and Khandalavala (1959), pp. 130–131, plate v; Mathur (2000), pp. 46–47, plate 5.

36 At least such is stated in an archival record of 1827 relating to this painting. Haidar (1995), p. 124, gives the full inscription as transcribed in Khan's thesis in n. 79; see also Mathur (2000), p. 46.

37 Haidar (2011a), pp. 533, 543, Fig. 11.

38 Pal (1997), pp. 258–259, plate 162.

39 Pal (2004), pp. 146–147, plate 68. On how the deity, in turn, promoted the legitimacy of the ruler, see Peabody (2003).

40 We should note, though, that this phenomenon was not limited to Krishnaite environments. We see it also in Shaiva contexts, such as the painting of Rājā Siddh Sen of Mandi (1684–1727) posing as Śiva the ascetic, or meeting Śiva and Pārvatī. See Michell, Lampert,

Undoubtedly Nihālcand's playful interventions were to his patron's liking, but the paintings were also enjoyed by a wider audience. They provide an intimate glimpse of the divine lovers' love-play, mediated through the presence of the eight *sakhīs*. This cult-like use amounted to providing special moments of poetry-enhanced *darśana* to the viewer.

Nāgarīdās, also experimented with Urdu, which was at the time called Rekhtā and was a wildly popular new poetic medium. While he composed several Rekhtā poems, his most sustained effort was a compilation of thirty *dohās* called *Ísq-caman* or *Garden of Love*.<sup>41</sup> It is replete with Persianate imagery, including that of the arch-lovers Laylā and Majnūn. One of Nihālcand's paintings is a depiction of Laylā and Majnūn that starkly foregrounds the lovers, who have eyes only for each other, immersed in conversation, presumably reciting to each other their poetry since there is a manuscript prominently placed between them.<sup>42</sup> They are not meeting in the desert as in the Middle Eastern versions of the story, but rather, on a grassy patch under a shady tree near a river, perhaps the Yamunā. Majnūn is not only emaciated but also badly maimed. Navina Haidar was first to speculate that this Kishangarhi Laylā and Majnūn may have been inspired by the reference to the lovers in Sāvant Singh's *Ísq-caman*.<sup>43</sup>

This speculation can be confirmed by evidence from a Mewar painting of Laylā and Majnūn preserved in National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, which is inscribed with exactly the relevant *dohā* from *Ísq-caman*.<sup>44</sup> This painting is discussed by Molly Aitken in the chapter on 'repetition and response' in her brilliant book on Mewar art, in which she discusses Rajput copies (*naql*) of Mughal originals.<sup>45</sup> She argues convincingly that often these were neither slavish copies nor sterile stereotypes but eclectic reworkings appreciated by their connoisseur (*rasika*) patrons. This is a very important insight and I would like to pursue its implications further.

Aitken seemingly dismisses the relevance of the inscription at the top of this particular painting: 'the painter did not reshape the archetypal composition in any

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and Holland (1982), p. 48, Fig. 292 and *ibid.* p. 176, respectively; the former in colour also in Goswamy (1986), p. 180, Fig. 138.

41 There are several calligraphic illustrations of *Ísq-caman*, which I discuss in my recent book (2015).

42 Plate 19; see also Haidar (2011b), p. 601, Fig. 4.

43 Haidar (2011b), p. 601, Haidar (1995), pp. 137–138.

44 The National Gallery of Victoria (India Accession Number AS31-1980) on its website dates it as eighteenth-century: <<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/col/work/53386>>. (Accessed 9 September 2013). Aitken dates it as nineteenth century (2010), p. 180.

45 Aitken (2010), pp. 179–180, Fig. 428.

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way to address the poet's distinct variation on the tale.<sup>46</sup> She stresses the figural aspect of this and other copies, freed from their discursive relevance, that is, unrelated to narrative text. Upon closer inspection, though, there is something to be learned from taking into account the text, even if indeed the painting may not be a response to it.<sup>47</sup> It consists of three *dohā* from Nāgarīdās's *Ísq-caman* (33–35):

*lagata hī lālasī rahai, pala bhī pala ugharaĩ na*  
*pūre madave husna ke, majanũ hī ke naina*

He remains thirsting, his eyes don't open, don't even blink.  
Majnũn's eyelids are heavy with her beauty's wine.

*calī kahānī khalaka mẽ, iska kamāyā khūba*  
*majanũ sai āseka nahī, lailī sī mahbūba*

Their story spread in the world, and warranted much love.  
No lover like Majnũn, no beloved like Laylī.

*majanũ kō kahaĩ saba asala, aura nakala ke bhāya*  
*kachũ hoyā dila mẽ asala, taba sakaĩ nakala bhī lāya*

All say: 'Majnũn is true, the others seem fake.  
If your heart holds some truth, only then can you try to replicate.'

These lines foreground Majnũn's uniqueness: he cannot be imitated; there is only one like him. The central rhyming contrast in the last *dohā* is between *nakala* (copy) and *asala* (true), which is repeated in both lines of the last *dohā*. The irony of these verses reflecting on the idea of copy/original to illustrate an image that was a creative copy of a Mughal original seems too much for coincidence. Moreover, this painting shows Laylā and Majnũn exchanging manuscript copies, presumably of their poetry, in which they express their anguish at being separated. A yet further level of reflexivity is that the text attached to the painting is a 'copy' (*naql*) of Nāgarīdās's poem *Ísq-caman*, sent to a Mewar ruler, possibly Ađi Singh (r. 1761–1773), who was a great patron of painting.<sup>48</sup> In response to Nāgarīdās's *Ísq-caman*, Ađi Singh authored *Rasik-caman*, again a creative 'copy'.<sup>49</sup> The person affixing the text to the painting may well have understood the lovers' exchange of

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46 Ibid.

47 In this case, the text may have been affixed to the painting later.

48 Ađi Singh, like his predecessor Jagat Singh II, was fond of depicting himself as a *rasika* enjoying art performances. An example is the 1765 painting by Bakhta preserved in the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne (AS183-1980, Felton Bequest; see Topsfield (1980), pp. 118–119, no. 167; p. 29, plate 14; online at <<http://maharajacourse.files.wordpress.com/2012/01/indian-court-painting.pdf>>. (Accessed 27 December 2013).

49 Pauwels (2015), appendix 2. A copy of Ađi Singh's work is in the Kishangarh royal collection.

‘copies’ as symbolic for that of the two poet-rulers. This is a vivid illustration of how combining both the textual and painting history can enrich our understanding of these artefacts.

Finally, I want to make the case that a striking painting identified as *Laylā-o Majnūn*, while not inscribed with a poem, could be related to *Īsḡ-caman*.<sup>50</sup> It depicts a man and a woman looking on keenly at a central scene depicting a haloed Laylā in elegant Persianate attire, with lifted sword, confronting an emaciated Majnūn in chains knelt in front of her. The image has been attributed to Ghulām Rezā and estimated to date from 1780.<sup>51</sup> One aspect of the painting that is unusual for Laylā–Majnūn depictions is Laylā’s martial stance, with raised sword in hand. She looks like a Persianate incarnation of the goddess Durgā, an impression strengthened by the halo around her head, which gives her a goddess-like appearance. This evokes a drawing from Bundi in which Majnūn is depicted as a supplicant, approaching Laylā as an object of worship, like a goddess on a pedestal (dated 1770).<sup>52</sup> As Aitken perceptively puts it, Laylā is here ‘a wholly Hindu icon.’ The Persian poetic trope of the bloodthirsty beloved has become conflated with the image of the sword-wielding goddess, ready to decapitate her victim. Majnūn becomes the archetypical Rajasthani hero, prepared to sacrifice his life on the battlefield of love, kneeling in front of the decapitating goddess.

Laylā is portrayed in this composite painting with some stylistic characteristics associated with the Kishangarhi school, in particular her elongated eyes, but also her longish nose and slender limbs. Could there also have been literary inspiration from Kishangarh to match the painting’s stylistic elements?

The depiction of Laylā as the bloodthirsty Durgā is similar to the imagery in *Īsḡ-caman*. In additions to the verses pasted to the Mewar painting quoted above, these verses of *Īsḡ-caman* illuminate what is happening in this particular scene:

17. The eyes of the beloved make short work of the innocent.  
When does she relent? Only when playing with a ball—her lover’s head!
18. With bloodshot eyes, the beloved has prepared the daggers:  
They come out stained with blood, as they go right through the lover’s chest.

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50 Sotheby’s (2011), p. 30. The inscription in Nasta’līq underneath the image that identifies it may well post-date the painting.

51 One of the leading Lucknow painters who worked on the Ragamala series that is now part of the Johnson Album in the British Library (Falk and Archer (1981), pp. 170–173). The attribution seems to be based mainly on the landscape elements and the ‘paratactic’ composition; see Aitken (2009). I am grateful to Dipti Khara of New York University for suggesting this to me. An additional feature may be the subtle appearance of the eyelashes of the eye that is itself unseen in the profile pose, which is also noticeable in some of the Ghulām Rezā Ragamala figures (*Todi Rāginī*, see Losty (2003), p. 123, plate 5; *Khambhavatī Rāginī*, see Falk and Archer (1981), p. 350, plate ix).

52 See Aitken (2010), p. 201, Fig. 450.

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19. He does not retreat from the battlefield, though out of breath, he pushes ahead.  
As his head flies, hit by [her] eyes, he manages “bravo” with his last breath  
...  
21. [Her] eyes wounded him, he fainted on passion’s battlefield.  
[She] tied [him] with her hair’s curly laces and finished by shattering his heart.  
...  
44. Where the heart is always wounded, and the mud is mixed with blood,  
Where the lover is waylaid and plundered, there, Nāgar says, is the garden  
of love.<sup>53</sup>

The illustration does not fit perfectly, but the images evoked in *Ísq-caman* are remarkably similar. This is not unlike what we have seen in the Nihālcand paintings studied above. Also parallel with that is the presence of spectators of the central scene. In this case, it is not eight *sakhīs* but a man and woman who witness the scene. Possibly, they are lovers themselves, as suggested by the presence of an old crone go-between, against whom the young lady is leaning. Perhaps the artist intended to suggest that the old lady has been conjured up the central scene to foretell a possible outcome of their own love affair. Confronted with such a vision of excess, the man seems to keep his ‘heart in hand,’ as he makes a protective gesture toward his chest, and his expression could be read as being taken aback. For her part, the young lady seems rather enchanted by the possibility of wielding such power; in any case she is intrigued—her expression with the finger on the lip is that of *adbhūta rasa* or ‘wonder.’

These peripheral figures of the scene provide a metalevel to the painting that is not present in *Ísq-caman*. Could the painting represent one possible reading of the poem? Should we allow it to guide us toward another possible interpretation of the whole work? Perhaps it was intended as a warning against excessive love, or as a wry comment on one of the patron’s own love affairs or that of a friend? Whatever the case, certainly the possibility of reading a painting as part of the reception history of a poem is an exciting one.

This chapter has presented a case study of how a synoptic process of reading evidence from literature together with visual arts can open up new avenues. Combining insights from the disciplines of textual studies and art history could lead to a fruitful symbiosis between these academic communities.

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<sup>53</sup> *Ísq-caman* selections; full text and translation in Pauwels (2015), appendix 1.

## Abbreviations of dictionaries

- BBSK* Gupta, Dīndayāl and Premnarāyaṇ Taṇḍan (eds). 1974 (VS 2031). *Brajbhāṣā Sūrkoś*. Lucknow: Viśvavidyālay Hindī Prakāśan.
- HŚS* Dās, Śyāmsundar, et al. (eds). 1965-75. *Hindī śabdsāgar*. 11 Vols. Benares: Nāgarīpracāriṇī Sabhā.
- Platts* Platts, John T. (ed.). 1974 [1930]. *A Dictionary of Urdū, classical Hindī, and English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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