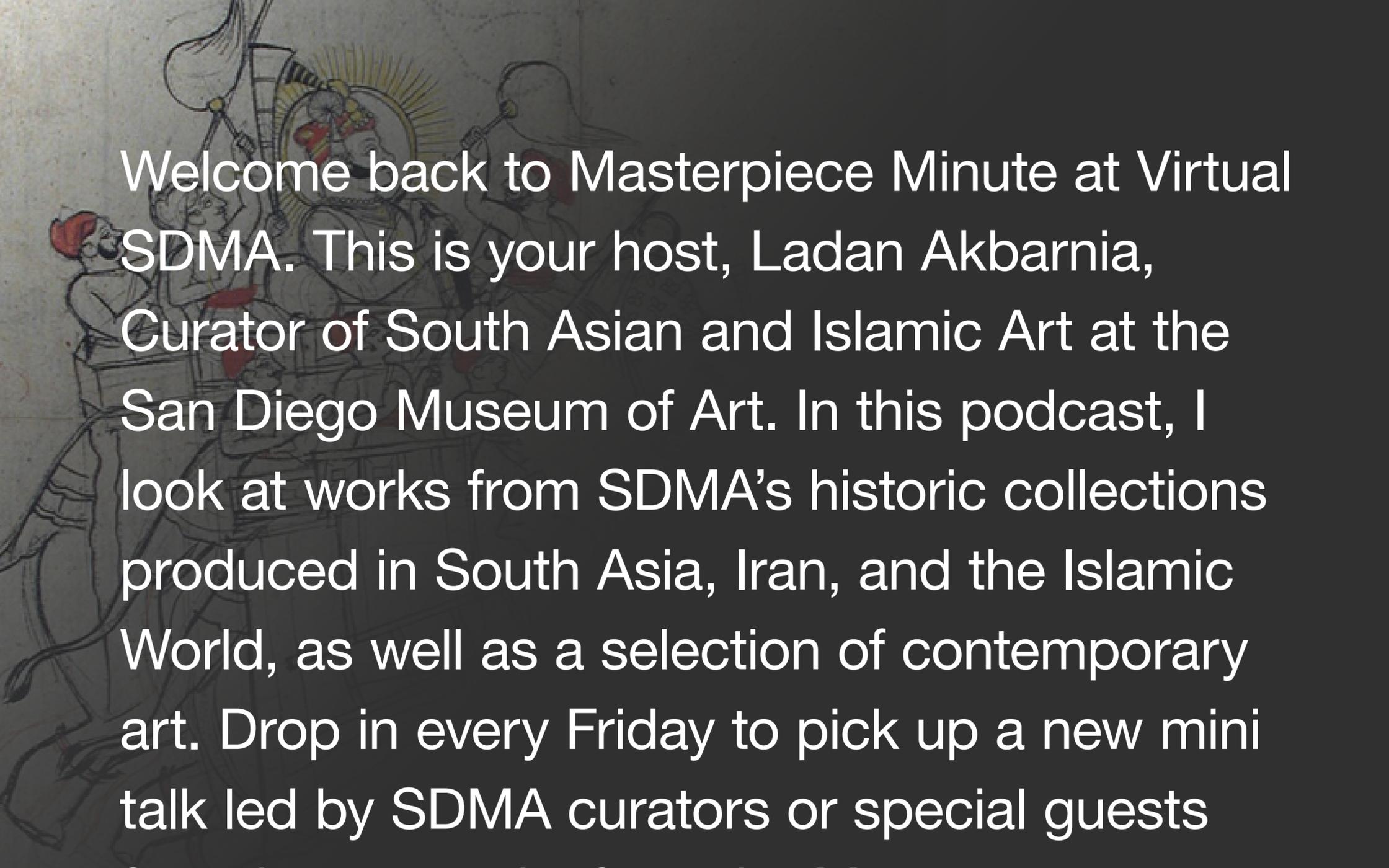


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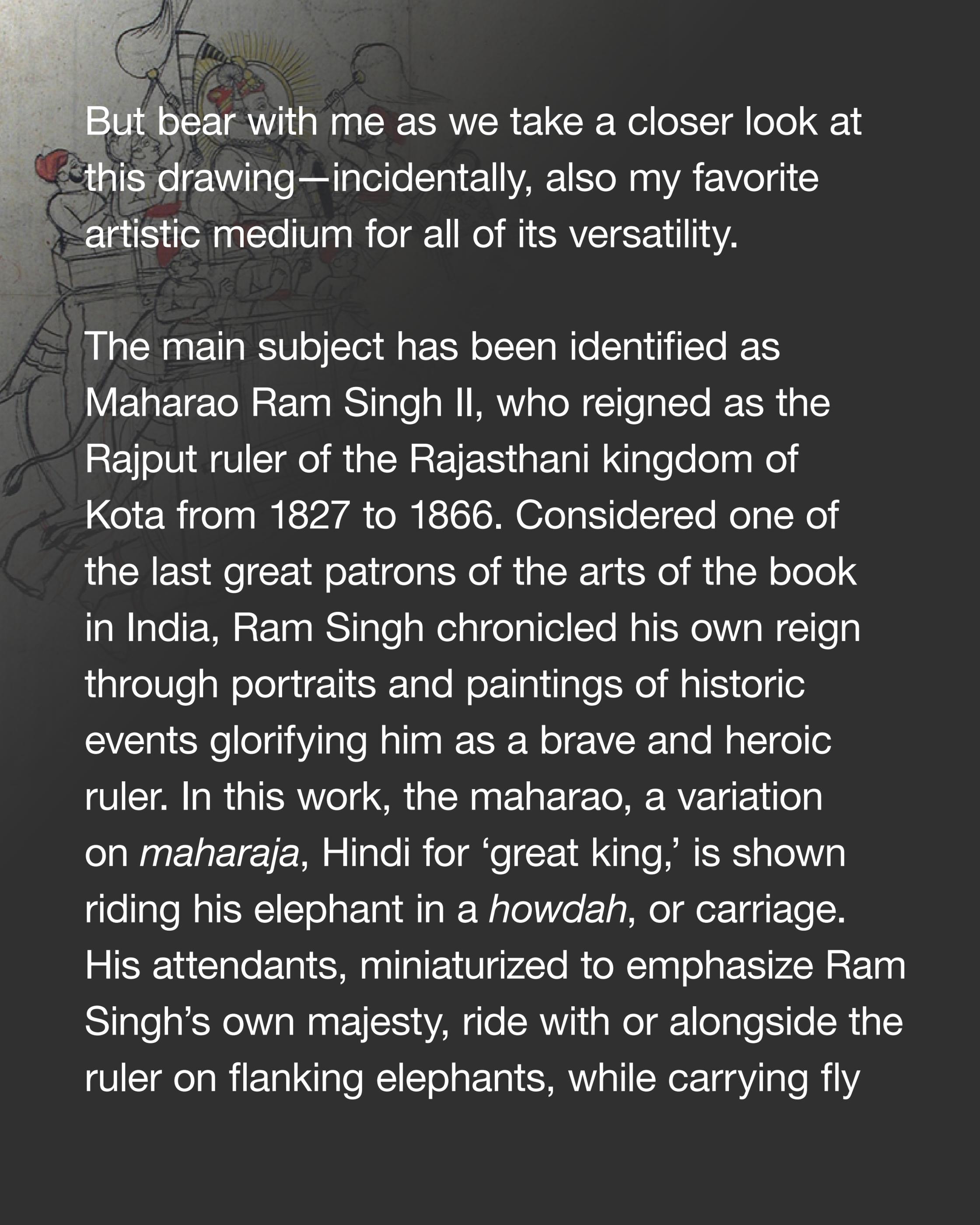
MASTERPIECE  
MINUTE





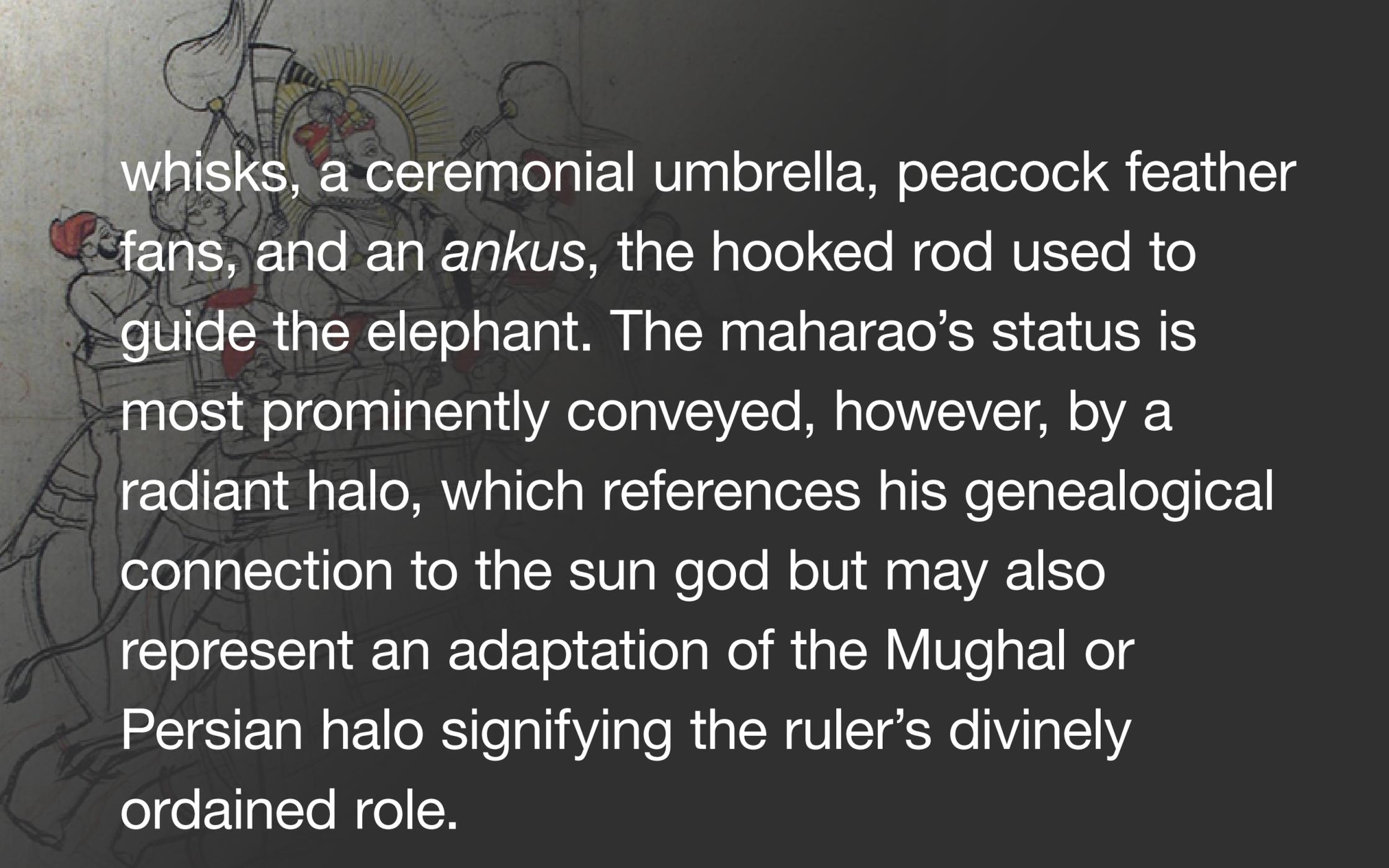
Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA. This is your host, Ladan Akbarnia, Curator of South Asian and Islamic Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. In this podcast, I look at works from SDMA's historic collections produced in South Asia, Iran, and the Islamic World, as well as a selection of contemporary art. Drop in every Friday to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators or special guests focusing on works from the Museum.

In today's episode, we study another work from the SDMA exhibition, *The Elephant in the Room: Indian paintings from the Edwin Binney 3rd Collection*. At first glance, it appears to be a rather underwhelming unfinished composition on paper, depicting a royal figure with attendants riding elephants in procession.



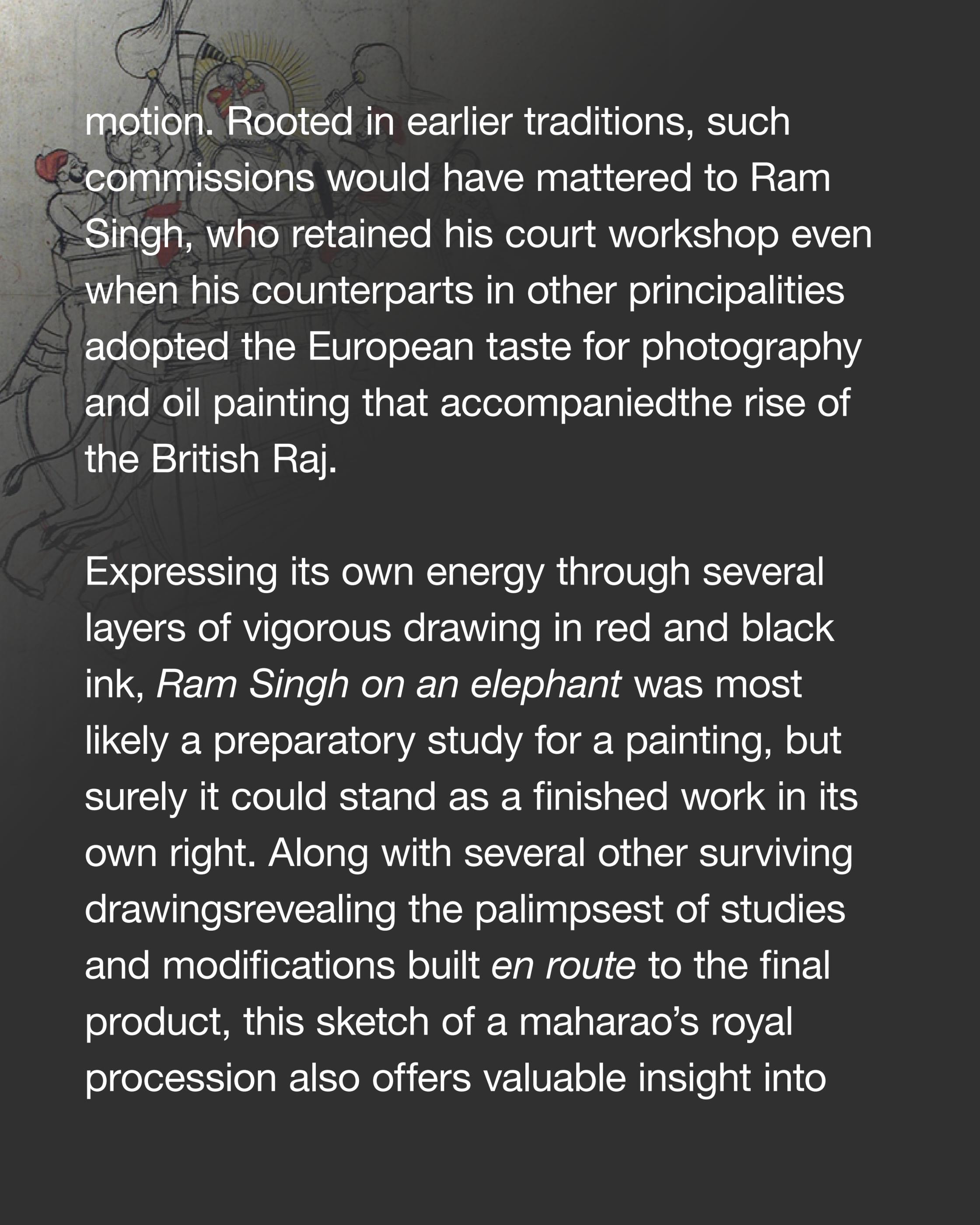
But bear with me as we take a closer look at this drawing—incidentally, also my favorite artistic medium for all of its versatility.

The main subject has been identified as Maharao Ram Singh II, who reigned as the Rajput ruler of the Rajasthani kingdom of Kota from 1827 to 1866. Considered one of the last great patrons of the arts of the book in India, Ram Singh chronicled his own reign through portraits and paintings of historic events glorifying him as a brave and heroic ruler. In this work, the maharao, a variation on *maharaja*, Hindi for ‘great king,’ is shown riding his elephant in a *howdah*, or carriage. His attendants, miniaturized to emphasize Ram Singh’s own majesty, ride with or alongside the ruler on flanking elephants, while carrying fly



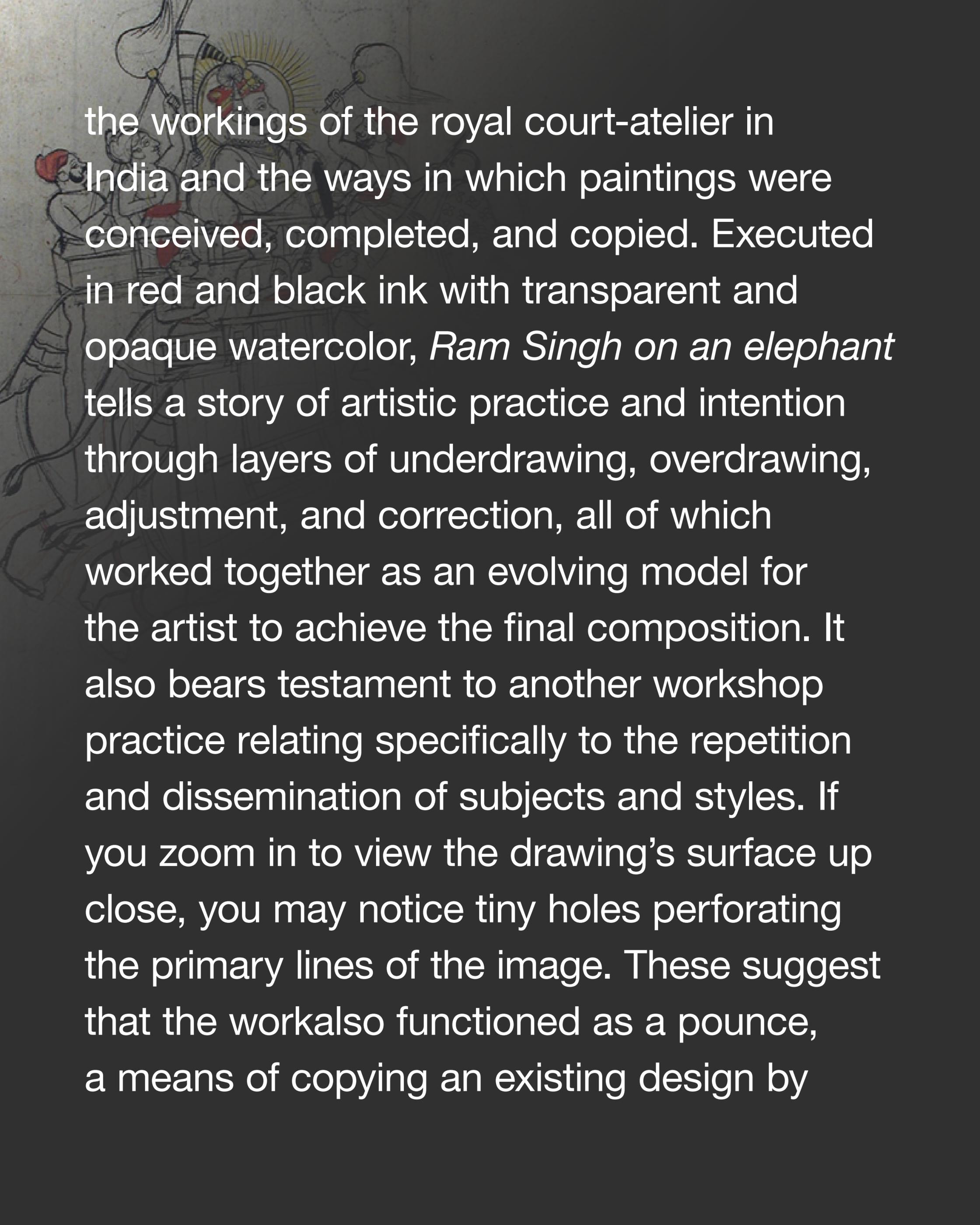
whisks, a ceremonial umbrella, peacock feather fans, and an *ankus*, the hooked rod used to guide the elephant. The maharao's status is most prominently conveyed, however, by a radiant halo, which references his genealogical connection to the sun god but may also represent an adaptation of the Mughal or Persian halo signifying the ruler's divinely ordained role.

Along with equestrian portraits, images of royal figures on elephants—whether at the hunt or in procession—helped visually reinforce expressions of their power and military might. Artists at the Kota court created dynamic depictions of elephants with thick, calligraphic lines in black ink, adding patches of color to generate a palpable sense of energy and



motion. Rooted in earlier traditions, such commissions would have mattered to Ram Singh, who retained his court workshop even when his counterparts in other principalities adopted the European taste for photography and oil painting that accompanied the rise of the British Raj.

Expressing its own energy through several layers of vigorous drawing in red and black ink, *Ram Singh on an elephant* was most likely a preparatory study for a painting, but surely it could stand as a finished work in its own right. Along with several other surviving drawings revealing the palimpsest of studies and modifications built *en route* to the final product, this sketch of a maharaja's royal procession also offers valuable insight into



the workings of the royal court-atelier in India and the ways in which paintings were conceived, completed, and copied. Executed in red and black ink with transparent and opaque watercolor, *Ram Singh on an elephant* tells a story of artistic practice and intention through layers of underdrawing, overdrawing, adjustment, and correction, all of which worked together as an evolving model for the artist to achieve the final composition. It also bears testament to another workshop practice relating specifically to the repetition and dissemination of subjects and styles. If you zoom in to view the drawing's surface up close, you may notice tiny holes perforating the primary lines of the image. These suggest that the work also functioned as a pounce, a means of copying an existing design by

dusting charcoal powder over a perforated pattern taken from the outline of the original. The weathered condition of the paper and evidence of damage caused by repeated folding further indicate that it must have passed through several hands in its lifetime, both in and beyond the royal workshop.

Thank you for listening. This has been Ladan on Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA!



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