

MASTERPIECE  
MINUTE



Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA. This is your host, Hannah Hyden, Research Assistant in South Asian and Islamic Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. This week, I am guest hosting Masterpiece Minute to introduce a piece from the exhibition, *Pearls from the Ocean of Contentment, Selections from the Edwin Binney 3rd Collection*. Drop in every month for a new mini talk led by SDMA curators or their guests, highlighting selections from the Museum's collections or exhibitions.

This month, we look at a masterpiece of Indian painting, a portrait of the Maharaja of the Rajput court of Bikaner, Gaj Singh II, who reigned from 1745 to 1787.

Standing on a balcony against a soft blue

and green landscape, Gaj Singh is portrayed in full profile with a gold halo signaling his divinely appointed status. The painting was completed in September of 1851 by the artist Ammaddin, 84 years after the ruler's death. The date is included in an inscription, on the reverse side of the painting, which states that it was a presentation picture, or *najar*, in the year when Gaj Singh's great grandson, Sardar Singh became ruler of Bikaner. It is likely that Ammaddin made this painting on the occasion of Sardar Singh's thirty-third birthday around the time of his accession to the throne, since his birthday was on September 14, and his father had just died that August.

Bikaner was a prominent court in the desert region of Rajasthan located in north west

India. An oasis on the trade route from Central Asia to central India, Bikaner flourished in the seventeenth century, when the Rajas of Bikaner were closely allied with the Mughal Empire, who ruled over the largest Islamic state of the Indian subcontinent. The Rajas of Bikaner lived at the imperial court of the Mughals, received land and titles from the emperor, and married sisters and daughters into his family. This was reflected in their portraits, in which Rajput rulers were depicted as courtiers of the Mughal state. By 1743, when Gaj Singh II was coming to power, the Mughals had been significantly weakened and overtaken by the new growing power of the Marathas, a warrior group from the western Deccan Plateau located just south-east of the Rajputs. With this new degree of independence, portraits of rulers like Gaj

Singh II were more concerned with regional rather than imperial relationships. Hence in the 18th and 19th centuries, Rajput royal portraits were intended to convey their absolute royal authority, without any reference to Mughal dominion.

Rajasthan's court portraits were not primarily concerned with depicting individuality and realistic representation. Instead, royal portraits were limited to a select few identifying markers associated with high status, including: a fat chin, pockmarks, a type of mustache or sideburns, and large teardrop shaped eyes. More important than evoking one's personal, idiosyncratic appearance was the artist's desire to visually demonstrate signs of social status and wealth. This was done through dress. Here

Gaj Singh wears a turban of pink, orange, and gold silk, pink *churidar* pants, a woven orange and gold sash called a *patka*, and a luxurious diaphanous muslin robe or *jama*. His warrior status is made evident through his weapons. He rests his right hand on the golden hilt of a dagger and in his left hand he holds a long sword decorated in precious stones.

The artist Ammadin achieved such a dazzling effect through a thoughtful consideration and application of materials. Gold flakes ground with shells were often used to produce a glimmering effect which emulates the shine of these sumptuously depicted textiles, jewels, and precious metals. By mixing gold with other metals such as copper or silver, an artist was able to achieve various shades of gold, which

enhances the tactile quality of each decadent adornment. The countless pearls strewn around his neck, in his ears, and woven through his turban simulate the texture of real pearls by painting them as thick raised white dots of pigment. While all of this is invisible from straight on, if you approach the painting at an angle, the rich texture and glittering shine reveals itself to you!

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

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