

VIDYA DEHEJIA

DEVI

The Great Goddess

FEMALE DIVINITY IN SOUTH ASIAN ART

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Mysterious Origins: The Tantric Devi Series from Basohli

TERENCE MCINERNEY

FROM 1660 TO 1670, an unknown master painted a great series of Devi paintings that have perplexed and electrified art historians since six from the series were first acquired by the Lahore Museum in 1920. The six paintings were called the *Tantric Devi* series and, for lack of documentary evidence, attributed to Basohli, the former principality in the Punjab Hills at the base of the western Himalayas, where they were found. Later, as scholars established the foundation for a narrative account of painting in the Punjab Hills, and as additional paintings from the series surfaced, the *Tantric Devi* series was associated with the earliest phase of painting, not just from Basohli, but from the entire Punjab Hills area. Scholars had assigned Basohli, one of the region's smaller states formerly in fief to the Mughal emperor, a cosmopolitan function disproportionate to its size. As the birthplace of painting in the Punjab Hills, it was thought to have been fertilized by an outside seed of mysterious origin; having germinated in Basohli in approximately 1660-70, the new style spread outward to establish local schools of painting in all the surrounding Punjab Hills states.

This beautiful theory of a singular, mysterious moment of birth, codified in 1973 by W. G. Archer in *Indian Paintings from the Punjab Hills*, required imaginative leaps that recent scholarship has effectively undermined. Basohli has been pulled from its throne and forced to rub shoulders with other centers of painting in the

Punjab Hills, where the existence of earlier traditions of miniature painting has now been established from at least the early seventeenth century. In the din of argument, the exact status of Basohli as a geographical center of painting has not yet been resolved. The ultimate significance of the early Basohli style, however, as represented by the *Tantric Devi* paintings and many other closely associated works, will surely survive the wear and tear of debate.

We now see these paintings not as the product of a disembodied historical force but as the concrete result of a single, unknown man. Emerging from a humble carpenter-painter background, he became the first great master of an indigenous tradition of miniature painting in the Punjab Hills.

If the paintings of the *Tantric Devi* series, as works of art, foreshadow the glory days of painting in the Punjab Hills, they also foreshadow, as religious images, the approaching demise of Devi worship as a dominant tradition in the same region. The seventy or more paintings in the original, yet now incomplete, series illustrate dhyanas, or meditative formulaic verses, which visualize Devi in manifold form. The governing impulse that required the pictorial expression of seventy or more subtle distinctions of bodily form was a thing of wonder. Yet it was also a thing of such bewildering complexity that it contained the genesis of its own spent force. One can see the underlying unity of form that connects one image in the *Tantric Devi* series to the next, suggesting a composite picture of the oneness and manyness of the Great Goddess herself. Yet the individual paintings and the disparate subtleties they embody are often very difficult to construe: they represent abstractions and an occult point of view that are intentionally obscure. While the cult still flourished in the Punjab Hills, Devi continued to throw off sparks, and her *Tantric Devi* series, in its encyclopedic immensity, presents a sequence of images unique in Indian art. But a growing movement associated with the more accessible devotional (*bhakti*) cult of the Vishnu adherents was well underfoot; Devi's days of glory in the Punjab Hills were numbered.

Sadly only thirty-two of the original seventy or more paintings from the *Tantric Devi* series have been recorded to date. It is likely that most of the thirty-two folios were once owned by Radha Krishna Bharany, the pioneering art dealer from Amritsar, in the state of Punjab, who is known to have sold individual pictures from the set from 1920 onward. Whether Bharany had ever owned the complete series, and if so, whether paintings from its missing sections may yet appear, are questions that only time and further research might one day resolve. Of the thirty-two recorded

folios, eleven are now in museums in India and Pakistan, eight in museums in Europe and the United States (including two in the Freer Gallery of Art), and thirteen in various private collections in the United States and abroad.¹ This exhibition with sixteen paintings² marks the first time more than six paintings from the series have been exhibited together.

The seventy or more paintings in the original set illustrate an unidentified Sanskrit text that invokes the Great Goddess in language of incantatory power. The text is a collection of short, elliptical poems (*shlokas*) equal in number to the seventy or more paintings they describe. Varying in length from two to nine lines, each poem is inscribed in neat *devanagari* script on the reverse side of the painting it accompanies. The poems are numbered in sequence from one to at least seventy; and the reverse, or painted side, of each folio is likewise numbered and inscribed in the local *takri* script on the borders surrounding each painting.³

The poems and paintings focus on the presiding figure of Devi with single-minded intensity. Suppliant figures and attendant gods who appear with Devi in more than half the surviving paintings only underscore the singular importance of the goddess herself, who occupies center stage and dominates the picture frame. There is very little action or movement in these paintings. Stripped to an iconic bone, they shun the easy pleasure one so often enjoys in more anecdotal Indian miniatures.

As painting follows painting in sequential unbound order, the Great Goddess appears in single images that record her individual forms and functions in all of their cumulative variety. In auspicious or terrifying guise, she appears as Bhadrakali (folio 41), Bhagavati (folio 13), Bhuvaneshvari (cat. no. 35), Indrakshi (cat. no. 33), Siddha Lakshmi (cat. no. 31), and Varahi (cat. no. 32), and in three paintings from the series she also appears in male form.⁴ According to the iconography specified in her accompanying text, she will appear in varying body configurations and display skin colors, facial expressions, and symbolic gestures of great diversity. She may have two, four, or as many as ten arms, and wear costumes and ornaments that differ greatly from one painting to the next. She may stand with attending figures who express her reflected power, or stand or sit alone. The spectrum of contrasting images makes a forcible point: "The goddess is each of these very different things, but only one at a time. She should be worshiped separately in each of her manifestations."⁵

There are other series in Indian painting that depict the individual manifestations of a Hindu god in a pictorially integrated sequence of icons. (Series illustrating the ten or more incarnations of Vishnu are the best-known examples.) There are

also other series that exalt Devi. But these other series either illustrate the manifestations of a male god, or glorify Devi by illustrating her principal myths and legend in narrative format. As an extended series of individual icons, the *Tantric Devi* series is unique in Indian art.⁶

In the hands of a less gifted painter, this collection of icons might have resulted in a serial work of art that offered the visual stimulation of a deck of cards. But the artist's rapt identification with the minutiae of his exacting subject and his ability to see the expressive potential in the limited range of color and form that served it best have resulted in a sequence of images that are effective as ritual aids and exciting as works of art.

The individual paintings are distinct, with their own iconography and purposes, but they are also interrelated. Because the individual manifestations of Devi tend to be seen as close relatives of one another, her pictorial structure hardly varies in form from one image to the next. The color of the background changes, ranging in intensity from a high-pitched Indian yellow to a deeper green or chocolate brown. But the color always defines an identical four-square field, shaped by a border (usually red) of contrasting intensity. The figures punctuating the center appear and reappear in different guises, yet their size and proportions are much the same, and relative to the surrounding frame they are configured according to the same underlying geometric principles. All of the goddesses also wear the same crescent moon in their crowns and display the third eye in their forehead, denoting their essential energy, the force of all the cosmic evolution (cat. nos. 27-42). The interrelatedness of these seemingly trivial features reflects a sense of the oneness and manyness of the goddess herself. Like figures projected on the back of a shadow box, Devi's many different forms displace light from a common source.

That paintings of such small size and reductive form can achieve effects of such intense energy is one of the wonders of the series when its paintings are considered as works of art, rather than as iconic images or aids to worship. Their great vibrance is partly the result of the masterful color combinations, which calibrate relationships of hue and density for maximum impact, and partly the result of the vigorous line, which integrates form in rounded contours and bounding surface rhythms of unexpected power.

The figures have the same taut, rather squat body, large heads, emphatic features, and enormous eyes that focus in an expression of piercing intensity. There is some three-dimensional modeling of form, but it is used to strengthen contour lines

and to emphasize shapes, not to render an illusion of light and shade.⁷ The paintings are filled with light, but it is the spectral light of pure color. Some of the pictures also convey a suggestion of spatial recession, yet the prevailing convention is a single flat plane with little depth.

Within this rigorously spare format, the individual figures and occasional props are embellished with textile patterns, ornaments, and attributes of unexpected richness. The exquisitely voluptuous decorative details and the highly burnished surfaces that incorporate a lavish display of applied beetle-wing cases to simulate jewels have prompted at least one admirer of the series to describe its effect as one of "barbaric magnificence."⁸ This misguided appreciation, however, does not take into account the conceptual refinements or extremely subtle negotiations of line and form that underpin the ambient surface effects. These underlying properties reflect a sustained tradition of thought and practice, not a visceral or instinctual moment.

The artist who designed and painted all of these pictures is more than just a mystery: he is a complete blank slate. He has been dubbed "Master of the Early *Rasamanjari*" by Brijinder Nath Goswamy and Eberhard Fischer who, having compared the paintings of the *Tantric Devi* series with those from another famous set from the Punjab Hills (the "early" *Rasamanjari* series), were the first to identify the two series as the connected work of a single man.⁹ The thirty-two recorded paintings of the *Tantric Devi* series, the approximately eighty recorded paintings of the somewhat later *Rasamanjari* series, and one or two additional paintings, are sufficient to establish the outlines of a distinct artistic sensibility.¹⁰ Yet no recorded fact exists that might shed light on one of the great form-givers of Indian painting in his social or historical identity.

The elements of his distinctive style as an artist and the presumed force of his personality had a great influence on subsequent developments in the Punjab Hills. Through the early eighteenth-century painter Devidasa (whom Goswamy and Fischer have speculated is the master's son) and several other important painters, the master's influence was institutionalized at Basohli, a small yet important center of painting, where it established the foundation for a brilliant "early Basohli" style of painting that recycled the master's ideas and refined his principles for another sixty or seventy years.¹¹ His work and the tradition it sponsored also had a real influence on several adjoining states in the Punjab Hills, where a previous tradition of painting had existed from at least the early seventeenth century. In due course these other schools (at Nurpur, Chamba, and possibly Jammu or Bahu) produced their

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own dominant personalities in the following generation. But the painter of the *Tantric Devi* series, who was active from about 1660 to 1690, was foremost among them. In honor and precedence, if not always in terms of direct influence, he is *pater familias* of the grand tradition of painting in the Punjab Hills.

Because painting in the Punjab Hills, also known as Pahari (from the hills) painting, is thought to represent one of the four or five great regional traditions of Indian painting, the identity and circumstance of its founding master is more than just an issue of passing interest. Until Goswamy and Fischer linked the *Tantric Devi* and early *Rasamanjari* series, the historical issues they had raised were discussed in terms of the unknown origin of the early Basohli or early Pahari style. (The two terms were used interchangeably.) As these paintings were generally acknowledged to represent the earliest phase of miniature painting in the Punjab Hills, the two series and an entire group of associated works bore the weight of the entire discussion. The unresolved questions and speculative ingenuities that were proposed, or dismissed with indignation, have vexed scholarly debate since 1916, when Coomaraswamy's *Rajput Painting* was published, until today. Now that Goswamy and Fischer have aptly personified the early Basohli style in the work of a single, if unknown, man, the issues have not really changed all that much; they have only shifted ground. The problem remains one of origin — if not of the early Basohli style, then of the early Basohli artist.

Unfortunately, the *Tantric Devi* series offers nothing in the way of intrinsic or documentary evidence that helps to resolve the mystery of its origins. The lack of a colophon or textual evidence of any kind inhibits speculation about the identity or circumstance of the aristocratic patron for whom the series was originally made, although the lavish use of costly materials and the investment of labor requiring the artist's service for at least a year or more suggest the patron was almost certainly a prince, or a member of his family. Nor do we know for certain whether it was painted in Basohli or Nurpur, the two adjoining states in the Punjab Hills that stake the major claim for patronage. As described before, the series had long been associated with Basohli, where a grand tradition of local painting made an early and dramatic appearance. But the Basohli association, not to mention its tangential implications, has been questioned by several recent scholars.¹² The only interpretive issue upon which they have all agreed concerns the very important issue of date; based upon stylistic argument, the consensus is for a date of around 1660–70. The lack of agreement about all questions other than date, and the paucity of intrinsic information, direct our attention back to the paintings themselves.



Approximately half the surviving paintings from the series depict Devi in single-figure format (fig. 1). Standing or sitting against a flat plane of color that leaves room only for a narrow strip of sky at the top or a flat band of grass or water at the bottom, Devi commands the center of her denatured world like a noble relic at the end of time. Her single-figure images embody the full sweep of the goddess's expressive power and run the gamut from her most benign to her most terrifying incarnations.

The opening painting depicts Devi in one of her most benign, attractive, and

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hadrakali. Folio
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984.42

sexually flirtatious incarnations (cat. no. 27), while folio 47 (cat. no. 38) depicts her terrifying polar opposite, the furious hag garlanded in a belt of severed hands. The artist's skill is particularly evident in the subtle way he has underscored these polarities in rendering the goddess's stance, gestures, and size. In the opening painting, Devi stands above the life-giving waters (not described in the text) and waits, as if to be approached, with face averted. In folio 47 she stands on a corpse and looms forward in an assertive frontal stance, as if to consume space and challenge the very border of the picture itself. When compared to her benign opposite self, she is about half again as large in bulk.

Perhaps the greatest painting in single-figure format, folio 10 (cat. no. 29), is more typical of the entire group in the way it blends the contrasting features and props of Devi's extremes. Standing on a corpse suspended at the center of the rising sun, positioned in three-quarter view yet reasonably small in size, Devi in this painting is neither coquette nor hag, but indifferent in her awesome neutrality. The surrounding space, which is empty in most of the other paintings, has a significant role to play here as well; the framing architecture situates Devi's remote presence in the approachable temple of her initiated devotees.

The theistic world of the multiple figure compositions displays the same wide range of expression (fig. 2). In these paintings (cat. nos. 28, 30, 31, 33, 36, 37, 39, 40) Devi stands or sits against an identical flat plane of color, but she will be attended by one, two, or as many as seven other figures. While the attending figures are generally not much smaller in size than Devi, their flanking positions and supplicating gestures leave no doubt as to their subsidiary status.

In the group scenes with attending figures who are maidservants (cat. nos. 30 and 40), the subsidiary figures are clearly ciphers. They intensify Devi's particular function, yet leave unaffected our reading of her essential character. In the group scenes with attending figures who have independent identities (cat. nos. 28, 33, 37), the meaning is more complicated, as these other figures carry the burden of a larger frame of reference. The interpersonal dramas that their presence suggests have one particular function or quality of Devi as their essential theme. But the thread connecting one figure to the next often becomes knotted as the figures are not engaged in common narrative pursuits. They embody abstractions, or states of mind, and coexist in metaphorical rather than narrative relationships. The mysteries they encode have a meaning the casual viewer can never hope to penetrate; they are intentionally obscure. What is hidden is only later revealed, first in lower, then in



higher levels of meditation, with the acquired knowledge, and to the trained insight of the initiated devotee.

This barrier to explication holds true for many of the single-figure images as well. Though less complicated in form, they are equally abstruse in meaning. Like many of the multiple figure paintings in the series, they offer the pictorial equiva-

The Goddess
by Rishi
Folio 59 from
Devi series.
Punjab Hills,
1660-70.
Watercolor, gold,
beetle-wing
paper. 21.3 x 23.1.
Museum of Art,
The University of
Chicago, 1997.8

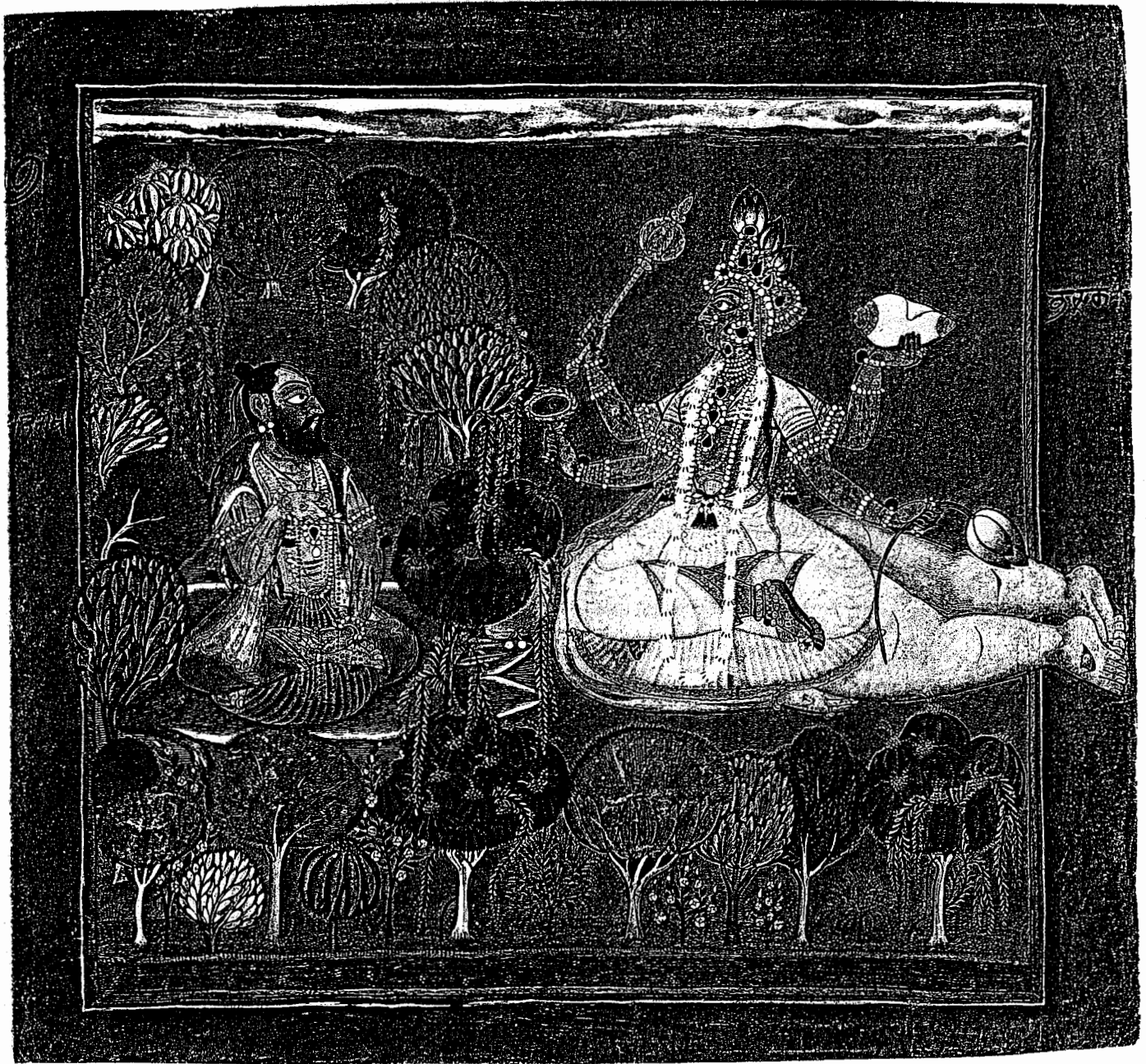
lent of *sandhya bhasa*, the encoded language that is intended to mystify those not in possession of esoteric knowledge.¹³

One interpretive reading of the type of metaphysical abstractions these paintings encode is suggested by one of the very greatest images of the series (fig. 3). This painting illustrates the meditational activity of the legendary Chyavana, who is seated in *yogasana* (the posture of a yogi), with rosary in hand, in his hermitage in a forest clearing. The painting illustrates the transfixing moment when the goddess has suddenly assumed form in response to Chyavana's intense meditation. Although Chyavana is mentioned by name in the accompanying text, he has a role to play in the picture that is not specified in the poem. As propitiator of Devi's image and recipient of her grace, he is a symbol for the viewer or patron of the painting itself. (Note the yogi's aristocratic, yet ritually inappropriate jewelry.) He has just achieved the result the viewer himself is meant to initiate. Chyavana's human status and surrogate perspective also provide a kind of skeleton key that opens the door to a world of hidden meaning the other paintings conceal.

Chyavana sits at the center of the forest-girthed hermitage that defines his world just as Devi sits atop the sprawling corpse that defines her own. As the shape of the forest with its extensions along the border mimics the shape of Devi as extended by the corpse, the two worlds have been linked and equated: they share a common profile of form. The pin connecting one world to the next is the superimposed tree, an elegant device that repeats the outline of the corpse's head yet blocks it from our view. This same tree is also the only tree in the entire painting that has just burst into dramatic flower.¹⁴ At this flowering moment of transference, in the blinding flash of mutual perception, has Chyavana envisioned Devi, or has Devi envisioned him? Does Chyavana have any real substance, or is he (and we) only Devi's dream?

Dialectical imagery of this type requires a sophisticated background of metaphysical thought and artistic practice. In the Punjab Hills, where the *Tantric Devi* series was made, the higher traditions of the Devi cult were celebrated in at least two temples famous throughout India: the *Vājresvari Devi* temple at Kangra, and the *Jvalamukhi Devi* temple at Jvalamukhi, near Kangra. As both temples are classified as *shakta pithas*, or sites where dismembered parts of Devi's body fell to earth, their high status has attracted pandits and pilgrims from very early times.

Both temples were also associated with the type of ritual practice called *tantra* that is such an elusive yet vital component in the poems and images of the *Tantric*



vi series.¹⁵ Tantra is not a belief or faith, but a code of occult rites and unorthodox practices. The tantric devotee (*tantrika*) may employ images that appear to reveal a national female bias. But a female image is neither tantric nor mainstream. Within the Hindu context, there are tantric, nonorthodox devotees of Shiva, just as there are tantric, nonorthodox devotees of the Great Goddess.

It is not my intention to discuss the intricacies of tantric practice or describe the subtleties of its metaphysical basis. Yet it is impossible to appraise the series

under discussion without at least pointing to the tantric features that color the meaning of many of its images. The recumbent corpses that serve as Devi's "footstool" in eleven of the thirty-two images are perhaps the most persistent tantric feature when the series is considered as a whole. These inert figures, which symbolize the spirit of the dead (*preta*), associate Devi with the cremation ground, the preferred location for many of the tantrika's most extreme rites, and the favored haunt of Devi's most fierce, destructive, and terrifying incarnations. Indeed her fierce and gruesome manifestations engender the qualities and features that one most closely associates with tantra. Devi's taste for wine (abhorrent to many high-caste Hindus) and for blood, her consumption of human flesh, protruding fangs, garlands of limbs, ornaments of snakes, and many other undeniably tantric features unloved by the squeamish, are insistent attributes in many of the images and essential to their meaning. The text as well, with its focus on mantras (magic, or meditational sounds) and other such incantatory devices, leaves no doubt as to the tantric affiliation of the series, or of the patron for whom it was made.

A celebrated manuscript illustrating the *Devi Mahatmya*, the fifth- to sixth-century narrative in praise of Devi, offers an earlier example of the tantric affiliation that characterized certain types of Devi worship in the Punjab Hills. This manuscript, now in the Himachal Pradesh State Museum in Simla, in the Himalayan foothills, was almost certainly produced at Jaisinghpur, near the Jvalamukhi Devi temple, between the years 1552 and 1581.¹⁶ As the patron, scribe, and artist of the Simla manuscript have been plausibly linked to a type of extreme, or "left-handed," practice associated with the tantric sect that controlled the Jvalamukhi temple during the time the Jaisinghpur manuscript was made,¹⁷ the many attributes of iconography that link the *Devi Mahatmya* manuscript to the *Tantric Devi* series suggest the practice encoded in the earlier manuscript continued as a living force up until at least the third quarter of the seventeenth century, when the *Tantric Devi* series was made. There are also numerous stylistic links, as the *Devi Mahatmya* illustrations incorporate features central to the *Tantric Devi* series as well. These include the general flatness and governing assemblage of four-square components, the backgrounds unified by a single plane of intense color, the narrow strips of wavy sky, and the small-waisted, buxom females with large noses, small chins, and enormous eyes.

Before the *Devi Mahatmya* manuscript was rediscovered in 1977, the *Tantric Devi* series had been thought to represent the earliest-known painting from the Punjab Hills. Its paintings were thought to inaugurate, "like some introductory



Figure 4. Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu. India, Brahmor Kothi, ca. 1670. Carved wood. Reproduced from Khandalavala, Pahari Miniature Painting

ation,” the entire sequence of early Pahari paintings.¹⁸ “Until the first half of the seventeenth century, no painting seems to have existed in any of the Rajput states of the Punjab Hills. . . . Indeed it is as if the great schools of Punjab Hills painting developed in the seventeenth century out of nowhere.”¹⁹

Since that time recent scholarship by Vishwa Chander Ohri, Brijinder Nath Goswamy, Eberhard Fischer, Catherine Glynn, and others has sketched a continuum of miniature painting activity in the Punjab Hills from about the year 1620 onward.²⁰ The evidence is often tentative, as it hinges upon the identification and dating of controversial portraits of early seventeenth-century Pahari rulers. Yet its general burden establishes beyond a reasonable doubt the existence of a connected tradition of miniature painting at Chamba and Nurpur (near Basohli), and another at more distant Mandi, that preceded the early Basohli style by at least forty years.²¹

Unfortunately, the insights and theories that provide the necessary connecting argument for these discoveries have suffered from the same strategies that once confused discussion of the origins of the early Basohli style. Any initiatory influence, anything prior to the time frame the authors have filled with a connected account of the activity of artists localized in the Punjab Hills, is ascribed to a mysterious outside influence. Where critics had earlier posited the arrival in circa 1660–70 of a wandering artist from the Mughal emperor Awrangzeb’s court to explain the sudden appearance of the early Basohli style, Ohri and Goswamy now posit the arrival of wandering artists from Gujarat or from somewhere else in north India, to explain the mysterious origins of certain late sixteenth-century developments that occurred in what our present limited knowledge sees as an historical void.

Such voids, quite properly, invite speculation. But the wandering artist strategy is asked to account for too much. It suggests that artists wandering to the Punjab

Hills found a region so deficient in local taste or prejudice that it was putty for the hands of an outside artist to mold. Any theory of origin or influence requiring the intervention of a wandering artist also requires a framing account of an ongoing, local tradition. If there had been no interest in painting in the Punjab Hills, there would have been no need for the *Devi Mahatmya* artist, or his father, or later colleagues from Gujarat, to wander there.

Ohri's focus on outside interlopers obscures his extremely useful and provocative arguments for the existence of a tradition of wall painting in the Punjab Hills that flourished from at least the eighth century.²² While no extant wall painting in the region predates circa 1720–30, Ohri posits the existence of an ancient temple painting tradition that can be inferred from the format and general pictorial style of carved panels (originally colored) that have survived on buildings in wood and stone dating from the twelfth century onward. Whether carved in wood or painted in color on a flat surface, these panels would have been executed by joint families of carpenter-painters. (Even today, artists in the Punjab Hills belong to the *tarkhan*, or carpenter, subcaste, which subsumes the traditional activities of wood carving, wood joining, and the painting of religious pictures, the distinctions having had little relevance to the ancient societies that first codified them as a joint profession.) Ohri also posits the existence of a separate tradition of manuscript illustration that would have flourished in a parallel relationship to his medieval wall painting tradition. (The *Devi Mahatmya* manuscript, illustrated in a style that also flourished in many other centers of north India, is the sole evidence for a preexisting manuscript tradition in the Punjab Hills.)

With this background in place, there is no need to introduce artists wandering from Gujarat, “who had worked for several years in the Mughal ateliers,” to explain the sudden appearance of miniature paintings in the Punjab Hills. Whenever they were needed, obliging artists were already in place: local men, standing with paint brush and chisel in hand.

What they achieved when carving in wood is evident in the surviving bas-reliefs from a ruined *kothi*, or district headquarters, at Brahmor (in the state of Chamba), some eighty miles distant from Basohli (fig. 4). Dating from circa 1670 or slightly earlier, these simple wooden panels (originally colored) are decorated with images of the principal Hindu gods.²³ Each figure stands alone or with a single attending figure, at the center of a shallow niche framed by slender columns surmounted by an identical cusped arch. The repeated framing device, modular format,

and tight adhesion of flattened figure to shallow ground recall similar features in the *Tantric Devi* paintings, made at approximately the same time. These related features, and the cognate figures with short legs, big heads, sloping foreheads, and enormous eyes suggest the local carvers and painters worked in very close proximity and shared a common language of form.

The affiliation of the carpenter-painter tradition, and the process by which it was refashioned to satisfy a new taste for miniature painting, have often been misunderstood. With all due respect to Ohri, the rough-hewn style of many of the paintings he associates with forty years of painting activity antecedent to the Basohli master have nothing to do with the intricate naturalism of Mughal style as it was understood at the imperial Mughal court.²⁴ In that epicurean setting these honest, yet modest, works would have been viewed, and dismissed, with alarm.

When miniature painting was first attempted in the Punjab Hills, the originating influence was not Mughal style, but Mughal subject matter and taste, which introduced a novel imperative. The desire to have individual portraits, which had been unknown in the Punjab Hills, and the desire to possess miniature paintings and to patronize an atelier of artists, was a taste the Pahari princes learned from their Mughal overlords, whose material culture they began to adopt from the late sixteenth century.²⁵ In wanting to have the courtly goods and services they had admired in Delhi, the Pahari princes resorted quite naturally to substitutions that took advantage of resources freely available at home. In satisfying the new desire for miniature painting, the local carpenter-painters cobbled together the simple products their previous training had equipped them to make.

The master of the Early *Rasamanjari* series, or the Basohli master, as we have also called him, was the first Pahari artist to emerge from the shadow of the carpenter-painter background, to occupy center stage, and to challenge the standard and ambition of Mughal painting in a style that had almost nothing to do with it. The features that connect him to the early seventeenth-century Nurpur and Chamba carpenter-painters and to an even earlier tradition of wall painting and carved reliefs are there to be seen in his work: the four-square backgrounds; the panel-like formats with insistent framing devices; the clear gestures and simple arrangements of isolated figures; the emphatic outlines shaded to look carved; the shallow space admitting props squeezed between the narrowing vice of the background and surface planes (note the splayed corpses that tilt upward). These features preserve the memory of what might have been an old family tradition. Yet they do not account

for the mental acuity or dazzling manipulation of color and line that enliven the humble legacy his genius transformed.

Whether the master was born and lived in Nurpur rather than in Basohli, on the opposite bank of the river separating these small states, I leave to others to debate. Given the connected sequence of paintings that elaborate the master's style and are assignable to Basohli from 1695 onward, it seems obvious he must have spent time in Basohli, if he did not always live there.

He was not a flawless painter. His faces in three-quarter view and several of the paintings with awkwardly positioned single figures, as well as the one or two with figures in front-of-the-stage lineup, are somewhat less than convincing as pictures. But when the master restrained his impulse to clutter or measure encompassing space, and focused on the flattened forms, rhythmic outlines, and taut configurations he painted best, he narrowed his vision only to soar. In this way he attained his own true darshan (seeing) of the gods, as his finest paintings in the *Tantric Devi* series attest. ■

NOTES

1. Eighteen paintings from the series resurfaced in a private American collection in 1979. They had been acquired on a trip to India in approximately 1922 by the father or grandfather of the 1979 owner. This group also included another iconic image of Devi that was different in style, size, and marginal handwriting from the rest of the group and lacked a number or text on the reverse. See Ehnborn, *Indian Miniatures*, 184–85, no. 88. As this painting is clearly related to the *Tantric Devi* series in format, we suspect it is an eighteenth-century replacement for a painting from the original set that had become lost or damaged. No other folios from the “replacement” series are known. Of the eighteen paintings from the 1979 American collection, fifteen are included in the present exhibition (folio 35 does not belong to this group.) For the remaining three, see figs. 1, 2, and 3.

2. For the sixteen paintings not included in the present exhibition, see the Appendix. The two paintings in the Freer Gallery of Art are figures 2 and 3 of this essay.

3. Devanagari (divine script) denotes the highly ornamented form in which Sanskrit and various Sanskrit-derived languages are written. Takri denotes the regional dialect and more cursive script exclusive to the Punjab Hills. The takri inscriptions were almost certainly added to the *Tantric Devi* paintings at a later date. Written in the form of brief labels, they summarize and occasionally misstate information contained in the Sanskrit poems on the reverse side. For Vidya Dehejia's translations of the Sanskrit poems, see the individual catalogue entries.

4. These three male forms are related manifestations of Bhairava, the terrifying aspect of Shiva: Shyama Bhairava (folio 21), Vikarala Bhairava (folio 23) and Bhasura Bhairava (folio 8). (See

Coomaraswamy, *Catalog of the Indian Collections*, 120, no. 160 and Goswamy, *Essence of Indian Art*, nos. 149, 151). As there are sixty-four major forms of the god Bhairava, I cannot account for the decision to include these three particular forms, nor can I explain their function with respect to the meaning of the *Tantric Devi* series as a whole. It is possible they were made for a companion series that illustrated the major forms of Bhairava. If so, this companion series was painted by the same artist, in the same style and format, at approximately the same date. Until the text of the *Tantric Devi* series is identified, the three Bhairava images will remain a puzzlement. As their folio numbers do not duplicate the numbers on any other paintings from the series, I have included the Bhairava images in the tally of thirty-two recorded paintings from the *Tantric Devi* series. I am grateful to Ellen S. Smart for calling the Boston Bhairava painting to my attention.

5. Lyons, *Simla Devi Mahatmya Illustrations*, 40.

6. Brijinder Nath Goswamy's belief in the existence of several Devi series in related iconic format is not supported by the evidence he cites: Goswamy and Fischer, *Pahari Masters*, 35, notes 6, 14. The two paintings published by William G. Archer appear to be individual works, not folios from a series.

(Archer, *Indian Paintings*, 1: 34–35, nos. 2–31 and 2: pl 17) They have different dimensions and marginal rules, and were painted by different artists. Another painting cited by Goswamy is probably an eighteenth-century replacement for a lost or damaged painting from the present Tantric Devi series, not a folio from a different set. (See note 2).

7. Beach, *Mughal and Rajput Painting*, 169.

8. Archer, *Indian Paintings*, 34.

9. Goswamy and Fischer, *Pahari Masters*, 30, 35. The *Rasamanjari* (Bouquet of delights) is a Sanskrit poem written by Bhanudatta in the fifteenth century.

10. We also attribute to the same artist a painting formerly in the Archer collection, and another in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. See Archer, *Indian Paintings*, 1: 34–35, 40, nos. 2, 5(1) and 2; pls. 17, 24. For color reproductions of these paintings, see Archer, *Visions of Courtly India*, 10–11, no. 5 and Kramrisch, *Art of India*, pl. 6.

11. Devidasa's close dependence upon the work of the "Master of the Early *Rasamanjari* Series" is detailed at length in Goswamy and Fischer, *Pahari Masters*, 60–63. Goswamy has pieced together a genealogical table of Devidasa's lineage from the records of priests at pilgrimage centers in north

India. These records reveal that Devidasa was the son of Kripal, whom Goswamy speculates is none other than the "Master of the Early *Rasamanjari* Series": "as Devidasa's work is so closely connected with that of the Master of the Early *Rasamanjari*, that master may be... his father, Kripal." (Goswamy and Fischer, *Pahari Masters*, 30).

12. Goswamy and Fischer, *Pahari Masters*, 30, and Ohri, *Origins of Pahari Painting*, 13.

13. Lyons, *Simla Devi Mahatmya Illustrations*, 37.

14. Dehejia, "The Goddess Worshipped by Rishi Cyavana," in *Beyond The Legacy*, 190–93.

15. Lyons, *Devi Mahatmya Illustrations*, 37.

16. For the *Devi Mahatmya* manuscript, see Goswamy, et.al, "A Chaurapanchasika Style Manuscript," 8–21; Goswamy and Fischer, *Pahari Masters*, 16–27; and Lyons, *Devi Mahatmya Illustrations*, 29–41.

17. Lyons, *Simla Devi Mahatmya Illustrations*, 37–38.

18. Aijazzudin, *Pahari Paintings*, 3.

19. Archer, *Indian Paintings*, xxi–xxii.

20. See Ohri, *Origins of Pahari Painting*: Goswamy and Fischer, *Pahari Masters*, 128–33; Catherine Glynn, "Early Painting," 21–64; and Glynn, "Further Evidence," 183–90. See also Goswamy, "An Early 17th Century Painting," 51–56, fig. 31.

21. Early painting at Mandi had a style, and followed a development, different from that of Nurpur, Chamba, Basohli, or anywhere else in the Punjab Hills. Clearly dependent on imperial Mughal painting of the second and third quar-

ter of the seventeenth century, it had very little influence on the adjoining states, or even on later developments at Mandi itself. The great artist whom Catherine Glynn calls Painter A, who was active in the years 1620–60, was perhaps the only seventeenth-century painter in the Punjab Hills for whom claims of Mughal training are not only plausible, but highly likely. Yet the extraordinary refinement of his sensibility and technique provided difficult models, as the increasingly feeble pastiches of his work in later generations attest. (See Glynn, "Early Painting," and Glynn, "Further Evidence.")

22. Ohri, *Origins of Pahari Painting*, 25–28.

23. See Goetz, "Basohli Reliefs," 1–12, figs. 1, 2. The *kothi* also had a second wing decorated with eighteenth-century wood carvings. Goetz' dating of the earlier reliefs to circa 1660/70 was based on stylistic analysis, as well as local tradition. Goetz' attribution was savagely dismissed by Karl Khandalavala. See *Pahari Miniature Painting*, 261–64. But recent scholars have come to accept the substance and prescience of Goetz' argument (Ohri, *Origins of Pahari Painting*, 20–21). A number of the Brahmor *Kothi* panels are now in the Himachal Pradesh State Museum, Simla.

24. For the early seventeenth-century carpenter-painters of Nurpur, see Ohri, *Origins of Pahari Painting*, pls. 7–12 and Goswamy, "An Early 17th Century Painting." For the early seventeenth-century carpenter-painters of Chamba, see Ohri, *Origins of Pahari Painting*, pls. 17–22, b, c, and Goswamy and Fischer, *Pahari Masters*, fig. 35.

25. Khandalavala, *Pahari Miniature Painting*, 19.