

Rajasthani Painters Bagta and Chokha: Master Artists at Devgarh.* Milo Cleveland Beach and Rawat Nahar Singh II. Zürich: Museum Rietberg, 2005. 135 pp.

Reviewed by Frank J. Korom

Devgarh, situated on the eastern side of the Aravalli Mountains in Rajasthan, roughly a two-and-a-half-hour drive north of the city of Udaipur, has long been known as a center of innovative artistic workmanship, according to Milo Beach in the preface to this volume. Until the 1950s, Devgarh was ruled by *rawats* (chieftains) who ruled autonomously under the *Maharana* (great king) of Mewar prior to Indian independence. One such 18th-century ruler was Rawat Jaswant Singh, who developed an interest in painting and hired an artist by the name of Bagta to serve the visual appetites of the rawats. After moving from Udaipur, where his style was similar to many other painters in the city, to Devgarh, his style noticeably innovated to become distinct for a number of generations. One of his sons, named Chokha, eventually left Udaipur as well, returning to replace his father when the elder could no longer continue his duty as court artist.

Court records, paintings, and drawings recently discovered by co-author Nahar Singh II (heir to the title of rawat) in Devgarh shed much needed light on this distinctive regional style that resulted from Bagta's artistry. Moreover, Singh has seen to the renovation of the Devgarh palace, which he has converted into a guesthouse, allowing visitors to view the magnificent wall paintings of Bagta and his family members. The visual journey of this previously unknown artist lands us at the heart of Devgarh's artistic innovations.

This beautifully produced book by any account, including some superb photographs by the late and great photographer Raghubir Singh, is the first to present the authors' new findings to the general public; it is a joint venture between the esteemed art historian Beach and the Singh family of India, those who retain the royal legacy of the area.

After briefly providing the region's historical background, the authors discuss the earliest artistic patronage at Devgarh from Rawat Sangram Singh (ruled 1706-37) onward, which consisted of wall paintings adorning the interiors of royal buildings constructed by the rawats. After this introduction, we are acquainted with master artist Bagta and his work. The authors discuss his departure from the Udaipur court to Devgarh, illustrating the discussion throughout with paintings attributed to Bagta that are housed in collections around the world (much of the collection was desperately sold off after independence in 1947). The next chapter focuses on Bagta's early portraits of the Devgarh rulers before turning to the establishment of a family style in the work of his son Kavala Mewar. They then focus on Bagta's greatest patron, Rawat Gokul Das, a child at the time of his accession to the throne circa 1786. Under Gokul Das' patronage, Bagta's style matured to establish him as an innovator within the Rajput school of painting. As the authors put it, "Bagta's indifference to formula and his insistence on seeing everything afresh, is virtually unique" (p. 70).

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The remaining 35 pages are dedicated to Bagta's younger son, Chokha, and Chokha's heir, Baijnath. A brief chapter deals with Chokha's early career in Udaipur, which begins with a painting dating from 1799. His early work, while mature, clearly imitates his father's but is less developed in terms of conception and composition. This fact suggests to the authors that Chokha received his artistic inspiration directly from his father. Unlike his father, however, Chokha often repeated himself stylistically. In 1811 he left the employ of the Maharana of Udaipur. By then, Bagta had been painting for over half-a-century, the longest documented career of any Mewari artist. When Chokha took over his father's position, his style became "bolder and less constrained" (p. 80), according to the authors. Some of his paintings even contain European influences. In one painting titled *Mother and Child*, for example, the imagery of the woman and infant lighted by candle flame in the frame definitively draws inspiration from Georges de la Tour's mid-17th-century painting titled *St. Anne and the Christ Child* (cf. p. 86).

1822 seemed to be a productive year for Chokha, for he produced several works that year, including the masterly *Battle of Haldighat*. His last known painting is dated 1826. The study concludes with paintings by Baijnath, son of Chokha and grandson of Bagta, beginning with his youthful *A Court Beauty* in 1822, then following the refinement of his work during the period when he was patronized by Nahar Singh I, toward the end of which he also sought out other patrons at Singh's court. The authors claim that Baijnath did not train a successor (p. 104), which led to a decline in the family tradition. After Nahar Singh I's death in 1847, there was an apparent decline in the volume of artistic output at Devgarh. To prove this point, the authors present the latest example attributed to Baijnath from 1849. Except for a few portraits done by Nand Ram, a lineal descendent of Baijnath, a few decades later, the family's artistic style sadly comes to a halt.

All in all, this is an illuminating study exemplifying the authors' claim that the most innovative styles emerged not in the large courts located in the cities that ruled the region but in the hinterlands, where less strict patron expectations allowed for more experimentation. The volume closes with copious notes, an annotated list of illustrations, a genealogical chart of the ravats, and a supporting bibliography for further reading.

Frank J. Korom teaches anthropology and religion at Boston University. He works primarily in India and the Caribbean, but is now branching out to Sri Lanka to study religion in a transnational context, focusing on Tamil Sufism. He is the author of Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal (Museum of New Mexico Press, 2006) and South Asian Folklore: A Handbook (Greenwood Press, 2006).