

Indian Knowledge Systems and the Indigenous Art of Jammu Wall Paintings: Epistemic Repositories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata

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Abstract

This study presents an exhaustive Indological and art-historical investigation into the nineteenth-century wall paintings and temple frescoes of the Jammu region, historically designated as Duggar Desh.[1, 2] Situated within the broader paradigm of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), these visual assets represent far more than decorative vernacular architecture.[1] They function as critical, non-textual repositories of classical Sanskrit epic literature, specifically the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, translating highly complex metaphysical, ethical, and cosmological treatises into a public-facing visual medium.[3, 4]

By examining the historical transition of classical Pahari and miniature painting schools to the monumental wall spaces of Jammu, this paper explores how regional master artists localized the transcendent concepts of *Dharma*, *Karma*, and *Moksha*. [5, 6] The report traces the sacred geography of Jammu's temple networks, focusing on the Vaishnava shrines of Sui Simbli and Burj in the Marh block, the central Raghunath Temple of Jammu city, the Shaivite pilgrimage center of Purmandal, and the secular-divine spaces of the Ramnagar Palace.[5, 7, 8, 9]

Through an analysis of classical aesthetic theories, particularly the J&K's Shaivite formulations of *Rasa* by Abhinavagupta, the study demonstrates how the visual triggers of the murals activate distilled emotional states in the viewer (*rasika*). [1] It investigates the geometric organization of narrative space, illustrating how compositions mirror the sacred grids of the *Vastu-Purusha Mandala*. [1]

Additionally, this paper examines the physical creation of these works, detailing the chemistry of natural mineral pigments—such as *hurmachi*, *singharfi*, and *peorhi*—and the chemical-mechanical bonding of the true fresco (*buon fresco*) method unique to the western Himalayas. [5]

Finally, the research article addresses the socio-political dimensions of Dogra patronage under Maharajas Gulab Singh and Ranbir Singh. [11] It reveals how the integration of Indian epic Literatures with religious syncretic traditional motifs in Jammu served to practically implement *sarva dharma sambhava* over a diverse, multi-religious population almost a century before Gandhi conceptualised it.

Ultimately, this research underscores the vulnerability of these living monuments to environmental and human threats, advocating for a postcolonial conservation framework that treats indigenous art as an active, living component of regional identity and intellectual history. [3, 6, 12]



Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, Epic Literature, Dogra Murals, Jammu Wall Paintings, Indigenous Art, Ramayan, Mahabharat, Indigenous Architecture

The Sacred Topography of Duggar Desh: Devika, Kashyapa, and the Sacralization of Space

The physical terrain of the Jammu region, known historically as Duggar Desh, is deeply connected to its spiritual identity.[1, 2] Within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), geography is rarely viewed as a passive, material landscape.[13, 14] Instead, it is understood as a living, sacred topography, or *Prithvi*, where physical forms operate as visible markers of divine actions. [1, 15]

This process of sacralization is clearly visible in the spiritual status of the Devika River. [2, 8] Flowing through the Shivalik range, the Devika is reverently called “Chhota Kashi” (Little Varanasi) or the “Gupt Ganga,” because its waters flow underground along major stretches. [2, 8, 9]

According to regional mythologies recorded in the *Vana Parva* of the *Mahabharata* and local Puranic oral traditions, the Devika River appeared during the transition from the *Dwapara Yuga* to the *Kali Yuga*. [2] The sage Kashyapa Rishi performed long, difficult penances to Lord Shiva to find a way to purify the inhabitants of Duggar Desh from the moral decline of the coming dark age.[2] In response to his devotion, Shiva appeared and manifested the goddess Uma in the form of the Devika River, declaring that bathing in its waters would grant purification equal to the Ganges.[2]

This sacred identity was reinforced by generations of royal patrons.[8, 16] The ancient temple complex of Purmandal, situated on the banks of the Devika, was first established by Raja Veni Dutt of Kashmir, identified by historians as either Vinayaditya or Avantivarman, who ruled during the late ninth century.[2] Centuries later, Maharaja Ranjit Singh visited Purmandal in 1838 CE to perform purification rituals and distribute alms, highlighting the site's status as a major regional crossroads.[8]

When the Dogra dynasty consolidated the modern state of Jammu and Kashmir under Maharaja Gulab Singh in 1846, the preservation of this sacred landscape became a priority for the state.[8, 11] Gulab Singh restored the central Shaivite shrines of Purmandal, offered golden ewers to the *Svayambhuvalinga* (the self-manifested stone deity), and established a traditional Sanskrit *Vidyalyaya* on the riverbanks to support classical scholarship.[2, 9]

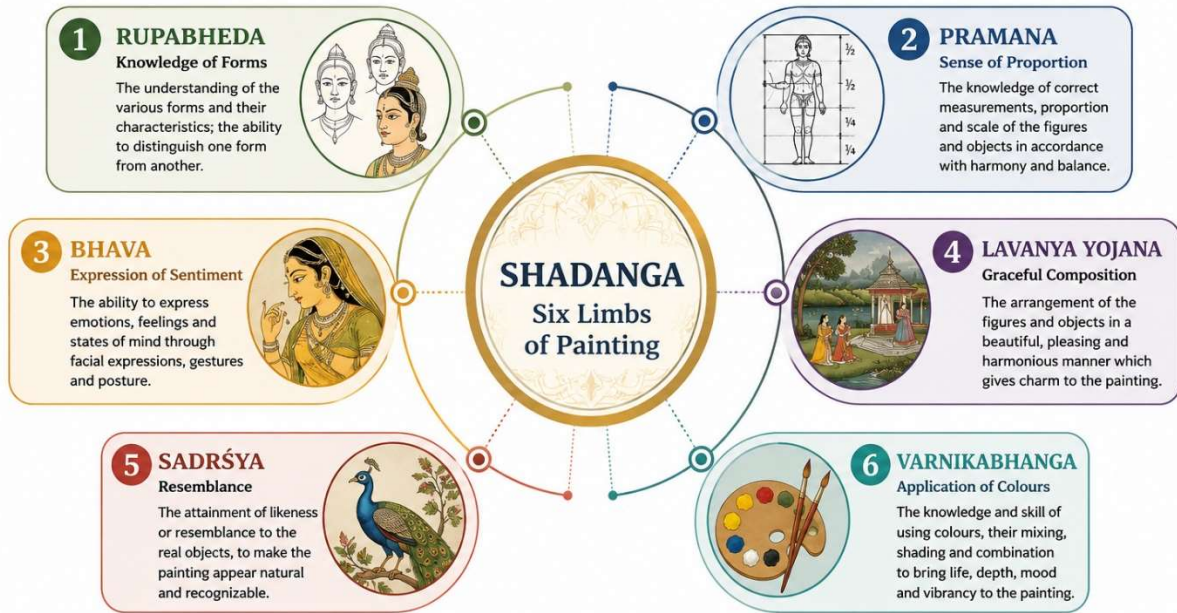
The visual art of this region—specifically the detailed wall paintings and temple frescoes—grew directly out of this sacred landscape.[1, 3] The painted walls of the *dharamshalas* and temples of Purmandal were not intended as isolated artistic works.[8, 17] Instead, they functioned as physical extensions of the pilgrimage ritual, allowing the traveler to mentally engage with sacred stories while physically moving through the holy landscape.[2, 8]

Epistemology of the Visual Medium: Indian Knowledge Systems, 64 Kalas, and Shadanga

Within the framework of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), the visual arts (*Chitra*) operate as a specialized branch of cognitive science and spiritual practice.[1, 14] Traditional Indian education was highly multidisciplinary, refusing to separate scientific inquiry, moral training, and creative expression.[14, 18]

This comprehensive approach is organized around the classical concept of the *Chatusashti Kalas*, the sixty-four fine arts and practical skills that every educated citizen was expected to master.[19] Far from being mere pastimes, these skills represented a structured path for intellectual and moral growth, balancing the development of the “head, heart, and hand”.[14, 19]

To guide the creation of visual art, classical theorists established the *Shadanga*, the “six limbs” of painting, first mentioned in Vatsyayana’s *Kamasutra* and later explained by the commentator Yashodhara.[20, 21] These six principles provide a complete methodology for evaluating visual form, proportion, emotion, and execution [20, 21]:



- **Rupabheda (The Knowledge of Appearances):** This principle demands that an artist possess a deep understanding of the physical and spiritual differences between forms.[21] In the wall paintings of Jammu, this is applied to distinguish divine avatars, ordinary mortals, and demonic forces through specific physical features, colors, and postures.[4, 5]
- **Pramanam (Correct Measure and Proportion):** This rule governs the structural and spatial design of a painting, ensuring that figures are rendered according to classical measurements (*tala*).[21] In the murals of Sui Simbli and Ramnagar, *Pramanam* ensures that the size of a figure matches its relative spiritual status within the composition.[5, 7]
- **Bhava (The Action of Feeling on Form):** This principle requires the artist to show the inner psychological state of a subject through physical features, gestures, and gazes.[21] In the paintings of the *Mahabharata* at Ramnagar, *Bhava* is visible in the sorrowful face of Arjuna during his dialogue with Krishna.[10]
- **Lavanya Yojanam (The Infusion of Grace):** This principle demands that a painting go beyond structural correctness to possess a sense of fluid beauty and grace.[21] In the Pahari style murals of Jammu, this grace is achieved through soft, curving bodily outlines and flowing patterns of clothing.[22, 23]
- **Sadrisyam (Similitude and Truth to Nature):** This concept represents the correspondence of the painted form to its real-world counterpart, not through photographic realism, but by capturing the inner essence of the subject.[21]
- **Varnikabhanga (Mastery of the Brush and Colors):** This final limb represents the practical knowledge of preparing pigments and mastering brushwork to bring the composition to life.[21]

In the indigenous wall paintings of Jammu, these six principles were applied directly to localize classical Sanskrit epics.[3, 5, 6] By transforming written verses from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* into visual forms based on the *Shadanga*, the artists of Jammu created a dynamic medium of public education.[4, 18] The painted wall functioned as a visual scripture, allowing those who could not read Sanskrit to directly experience the moral, philosophical, and theological teachings of the epics.[4, 14]

Aesthetic Metaphysics: Rasa Theory and Cognitive Refinement

The primary goal of classical Indian art is the cultivation of *Rasa*, an "aesthetic relish" or refined emotional state.[1] Rooted in the early teachings of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, this concept was expanded during the tenth and eleventh centuries by Abhinavagupta, a master philosopher of the Kashmir Shaivism school.[1]

Abhinavagupta argued that the experience of *Rasa* is not a simple emotional reaction to a story.[1] Instead, it is a process of cognitive refinement, wherein the viewer (*rasika*) is temporarily freed from personal ego, desires, and anxieties.[1] This state of quiet, elevated contemplation (*bhava-jagat*) opens a window to spiritual self-realization, which Abhinavagupta describes as closely related to the supreme bliss of *Brahmananda*. [1, 10]

The activation of this aesthetic experience is governed by the famous formula of the *Rasa Sutra* [1]. In the wall paintings of Jammu, the master artists designed their compositions to trigger this process.[1] The *vibhāvas* (excitants and triggers) include the use of bold colors and patterns—such as the high-intensity red backgrounds typical of the Basohli style—which immediately draw the viewer’s attention.[1]

The *anubhāvas* (physical reactions and gestures) are represented through the postures and movements of the painted figures.[1] For instance, when depicting battle scenes from the *Ramayana* on the walls of the Sui Simbli temple, the dynamic, sweeping gestures of the characters serve to evoke *vīra rasa* (heroic valor) and *raudra rasa* (fury) within the viewer.[1, 11]

This aesthetic methodology was not limited to painting, but was shared across all regional Dogra folk arts. It is visible in the traditional performance of *Karak* (devotional oral ballads accompanied by the king-instrument), which was designed to evoke *bhakti* (devotion) and *vīra* (valor). It is also present in *Bhākh*, an unaccompanied, collaborative vocal style that cultivates a quiet, introspective mood akin to *śānta rasa* (tranquility). Even the celebratory folk dances of Jammu, such as the *Dheku*, *Phummani*, and *Ckauki*, use specific rhythms and movements to stir a shared, collective experience of joy and romantic love (*śṛṅgāra rasa*). Through this shared aesthetic vocabulary, the wall paintings of Jammu participated in a regional culture where visual, performative, and ritual arts worked together to elevate everyday emotions into the realm of spiritual contemplation.[1]

Sacred Cosmology and Architectural Geometry

In classical Indian architecture, a temple or palace is never designed as a collection of random rooms. Instead, it is treated as a structural model of the universe, built according to the cosmic laws of *Vastu Shastra*. This design philosophy is based on the core Upanishadic concept of *Yathā Piśye Tathā Brahmāṣe*, which states that the human body and the physical universe are governed by the exact same structural and spiritual laws. This correspondence is mathematically realized through the *Vastu-Purusha Mandala*, a sacred geometric grid that represents the cosmic creator laid out on the ground. Depending on the specific architectural canon, this grid uses either the (*Manduka*) or the (*Paramasayika*) layout, where each coordinate corresponds to a specific cardinal direction, element, and deity.[1]

The placement of wall paintings across Jammu's sacred structures is guided by this underlying geometric grid.[1] A prime example is the central Raghunath Temple in Jammu city.[1, 9] The temple’s layout features nine distinct shrines arranged in a grid based on the *Vastu-Purusha Mandala*, where each chamber matches a specific cardinal direction and deity.[1]

The murals within these shrines are positioned to align with this grid. The eastern walls are decorated with solar motifs and images of Indra, while the northern sections focus on Kubera, the god of wealth and cosmic order. This cosmological design is also visible in the sacred layout of the Vaishno Devi Shrine in Katra, Jammu. The complex is aligned to the cardinal east, and its inner sanctum (*garbhagriha*) houses the rock manifestations (*pindis*) of the Goddess, representing the absolute cosmic center or *bindu*. The architectural design incorporates the five cosmic elements (*Panchabhutas*), and features a traditional wooden roof (*kaśhagarbha*) that symbolizes the dome of heaven.[1]

In secular spaces, like the Mubarak Mandi palace complex, the architecture uses central courtyards that represent the cosmic axis, with pink sandstone walls designed to reflect solar cycles. The interior paintings in these palaces are organized in registers and concentric panels that mirror this mandalic order. By using self-similarity and fractal-like patterns—where a single lotus motif on a column is repeated across floor tiles, ceiling panels, and wall borders—the artisans of Jammu sought to visually represent the recursive and cyclical nature of creation.[1]

Genealogies of Style: Lineages, Migration, and Scholarly Historiography

The development of the 'Jammu Kalam' (the Jammu school of painting) cannot be understood in isolation.[5, 24] It is deeply connected to the broader history of Pahari painting, which flourished across the western Himalayan foothills from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries.[5, 24]

Historically, early art historians studied these paintings through a purely regional lens, categorizing them into distinct geographic styles based on the specific courts where they were found, such as Guler, Kangra, Chamba, and Basohli. However, the pioneering archival research of Dr. B.N. Goswamy transformed this geographic classification. By studying pilgrim registers at major tirthas like Haridwar and Kurukshetra, Goswamy traced the genealogies of the painters themselves. He established that artistic styles did not develop in isolation within specific courts. Instead, they were preserved and passed down within hereditary families of artists, who migrated between different kingdoms in search of patronage.[24]

The central figure in this lineage was the master artist Pandit Seu, whose sons Nainsukh and Manaku became the most celebrated painters of the Pahari tradition.[22, 24, 25]

Nainsukh, who became the court painter for Balwant Singh of Jammu during the mid-eighteenth century, introduced a delicate, naturalistic style that combined local hill sensibilities with the fine brushwork of late Mughal art.[11, 22]

This artistic heritage was passed down through generations, surviving periods of intense political instability.[5, 11, 16] When the Sikh Empire consolidated its power in Lahore during the early nineteenth century, many Pahari painters migrated to the Punjab plains [11]. Later, with the decline of the Sikh court and the rise of the Dogra dynasty in Jammu, these artists migrated back to the hills, bringing with them a hybrid visual style that combined classical Pahari elegance, Mughal composition, and Sikh decorative elements.[11, 16]

The history of this school was first documented in detail during the late twentieth century.[1, 6] Scholars like Dr. S.D.S. Charak and his daughter, Dr. Anita Billawaria, recognized that the region's wall paintings were rapidly disappearing due to neglect and environmental exposure.[6, 26]

With the support of Jammu University, Charak spent five years on a documented photo-preservation project, building a comprehensive visual record of the region's mural centers.[6]

Billawaria's doctoral thesis, *Brahmanical Religious Art in Jammu Region, 1700 to 1900 A.D.*, provided the first historical and iconographic analysis of these works, documenting over 250 choice murals and establishing their value as primary sources for the social and religious history of Duggar Desh.[6, 26]

Chemical Alchemy of the Shivalik Palette: Materials, Pigments, and True Fresco Mechanics

The preservation of Jammu's wall paintings over centuries of environmental exposure is due to the advanced material science of its traditional artists.[3, 5, 6] Rather than simply painting on a dry wall, the artists of Jammu used a highly specialized, multi-layered plastering and pigment-beating technique.[5]

This process represents an indigenous development of the true fresco (*buon fresco*) method, uniquely adapted to the climate of the western Himalayas.[5]

The Plastering Process and Chemical-Mechanical Bonding

The preparation of the painting surface was a meticulous, multi-stage task.[5, 6] First, the rough brick or stone wall was cleaned and moistened.[6] A base layer of coarse lime plaster was applied, mixed with river sand, fibers, and organic binders like legumes and unrefined sugar (*jaggery*).[5, 6, 27] This base layer was left to cure, providing a stable, breathable support structure.[6, 27]

The painting surface itself required a secondary layer of extremely fine, pure lime plaster, known as *kadi* or *vajralepa*. [5, 6] While this secondary layer was still wet, the artist transferred the preliminary drawings.[3, 6] These initial sketches were made using a charred willow twig or light red earth (*geru*). [28]

The key difference between the Italian *buon fresco* technique and the indigenous Indian process lies in how the pigments are integrated into the plaster.[5] In the Italian method, colors are applied to wet lime plaster, relying entirely on the chemical reaction of carbonation:

This reaction locks the pigment within a thin layer of calcium carbonate. The Indian process combined this chemical carbonation with a rigorous mechanical process. The artist applied natural pigments directly to the wet plaster and then beat the paint layer with a small wooden trowel or polished stone. This physical beating forced the pigment particles deep into the wet lime pores. Following this, a small, highly polished iron spatula or stone was rubbed over the surface in a process known as “running-in” [5]. This burnishing flattened the lime fibers, sealed the surface pores, and created a highly polished, durable shell that protected the murals from humidity, water, and soot.[5, 28]

The Indigenous Palette: Extraction and Preparation of Natural Pigments

The vibrant colors that define the Jammu wall paintings were extracted entirely from local minerals, clays, semi-precious stones, plants, and organic processes.[3, 5] The creation of these pigments was itself a branch of traditional chemistry (*Rasashastra*), requiring careful grinding, purification, and binding.[3, 15, 19]

Color Name	Primary Material Source	Mineral / Chemical Composition	Metaphysical & Symbolic Association
Hurmachi	Local red clay	Iron oxide (with clay)	Grounded earth, primordial energy, and sacrificial heat
Sandhuri	Roasted lead ore	Red lead	Marital purity, divine protection, and auspiciousness
Singharfi	Cinnabar mineral	Mercuric sulphide	High-intensity power, royal sovereignty, and the energy of <i>Shakti</i>
Hartial	Orpiment mineral	Arsenic trisulphide	Solar energy, intellectual clarity, and divine illumination
Peorhi	Cow urine extract	Magnesium euxanthate (cows fed on mango leaves)	Ascetic gold, spiritual purity, and the light of <i>Dharma</i>
Sang-i-Sabz	Powdered green stone	Terre verte (glauconite / celadonite)	Natural harmony, fertility, and the deep forests of exile
Neel	Indigo plant extract	Indigotin	Cosmic infinity, the depth of the void, and the skin of Krishna/Rama
Sankh	Ground conch shells	Calcium carbonate	Primal sound (<i>Pranava</i>), cosmic purity, and transcendent light
Kajal	Earthen lamp soot	Carbon black	Grounding energy, definition, and protection from the evil eye

Precision Instruments: Master Brushwork

To apply these pigments, artists required high-precision tools. Brushes were handcrafted using animal hairs selected for their elasticity, water retention, and tensile strength. Coarse background brushes were made from goat or camel hair, while medium brushes used cat hair. For the delicate outlines, fine details, and expressive features of the Pahari style, artists used brushes made from the tail-hairs of the Himalayan squirrel. These hairs were bound within a hollow bird quill and fixed to a slender bamboo reed (*kalam*).[28] This tool allowed master painters to execute fine details, such as individual hairs, the delicate patterns of royal garments, and the expressive curves of lotus-shaped eyes.[7, 22, 28]

Narrative Topography: Epic Cycles in the Sui Simbli and Burj Temples

The Vaishnava temple networks of Jammu—most notably the Sui Simbli and Burj complexes in the Marh block and the central Raghunath Temple—contain some of the most extensive epic narrative paintings in northern India.[5, 9, 29] Rather than functioning as isolated illustrations, these murals are integrated

directly into the temples' architectural design, creating a narrative space that guides the viewer's physical movement.[5, 11]

The Sui Simbli Temple: The Raghunath Shrine and the Ramayana Cycle

The Raghunath Temple at Sui Simbli is situated approximately 20 kilometers northwest of Jammu city.[5, 11] Architecturally, the core structure is a *sandhara*-type temple, featuring a rectangular layout that includes an inner sanctum (*garbhagriha*), an antechamber (*antarala*), and a main assembly hall (*mandapa*).[5] The inner sanctum houses the primary deities of Lord Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita.[5, 30]

The interior walls of the Sui Simbli complex are heavily decorated with detailed murals from the *Ramayana*. [5, 11, 30] A particularly prominent scene is the monumental “Battle between the Lanka Forces and the Monkey Army”.[11]

In this mural, the artist manages spatial organization to build a sense of high drama.[10, 23] Rather than presenting a single, static image, the scene uses a continuous narrative style.[4, 5, 29] Multiple stages of the battle are shown within a single, unified visual field.[4, 20]

Rama is depicted with deep blue skin, reflecting the use of indigo, holding his divine bow *Kodanda*. [5, 31] His posture is a study in classical warrior stance (*alidha*), expressing heroic valor (*vīra rasa*). [1] Opposite him, the demon king Ravana is shown with ten heads and twenty arms, holding a vast array of weapons. [4, 32]

The chaotic movement of the monkey army—rendered with light, fluid outlines—contrasts with the rigid, heavy, and metallic armor of the demon army. [7, 11, 23] This visual contrast reinforces the epic's core moral theme: the ultimate triumph of cosmic order over chaotic forces. [3, 4, 32]

The Burj Temple: Architectural Synthesis and Non-Linear Epics

Less than a kilometer from Sui Simbli lies the Burj Temple, which displays a unique blend of architectural styles. [5, 30] The outer structure merges features of Rajasthani temple architecture with a dome style reminiscent of Punjabi Sikh gurdwaras. [30]

Internally, the temple is divided into two distinct levels. The lower level contains chambers dedicated to regional saints. [5] The upper level consists of an octagonal room that is covered in murals from floor to ceiling. This upper level houses the images of Rama, Sita, and Krishna, aligning the space with Vaishnava devotion. [5, 30]

The murals of the Burj Temple are unusual because they do not follow a linear, chronological path. [5] Instead, scenes from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavata Purana*, and the *Krishna Leela* are placed side by side without a clear sequential narrative. [5, 30]

A scene of Krishna lifting the Govardhan Hill might sit directly next to a depiction of Arjuna's dialogue with Krishna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, which is then flanked by Rama's triumphant return to Ayodhya. [5, 11]

This non-linear layout encourages a spatial reading of the epics. For the pilgrim performing the ritual circumambulation (*pradakshina*), the walls present a rich collage of sacred history. [5] Rather than reading the epics as historical timelines, the viewer experiences them as a single, ever-present reality. [4, 5] This visual arrangement reflects the Hindu view of cyclical, non-linear time. [1, 13]

The Raghunath Temple of Jammu City: Monumental Space and Sacred Text

In the heart of Jammu city, the monumental Raghunath Temple complex stands as the center of the region's nineteenth-century religious revival. [3, 9, 33] Initiated by Maharaja Gulab Singh in 1835 and completed by his son Maharaja Ranbir Singh in 1860, this complex contains seven distinct shrines, making it one of the largest temple complexes in northern India. [9, 33]

The main sanctuary is dedicated to Rama, the patron deity of the Dogra dynasty, and its inner walls are covered on three sides. [9, 33]

The surrounding galleries and ceilings are covered in fine frescoes depicting scenes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. [3] These frescoes are distinguished by their fine detailing, bold outlines, and sophisticated symmetry, which show a strong influence of both Mughal court style and classical Pahari idioms. [3]

The murals function as a public, visual translation of the library's Sanskrit texts.[4, 10] This visual display made the epics' complex moral and spiritual teachings accessible to all visitors, regardless of their literacy or social background. [3, 4, 18]

Secular-Divine Convergence: The Palace Murals of Ramnagar

The integration of epic narratives with architectural design was not limited to temples.[7, 23, 34] In the historic town of Ramnagar, the capital of the erstwhile Bandralta state in Udhampur district, the Ramnagar Palace and Fort complex showcases how these narratives were used to design royal, secular spaces.[7, 34, 35]

Constructed largely under the patronage of Raja Suchet Singh (one of the three founding Dogra brothers) and later expanded by Raja Ram Singh, this palace complex contains a rich cycle of wall paintings that document the political, spiritual, and military life of nineteenth-century Jammu. [7, 34, 35]

The Architectural Triad of the Sheesh Mahal: Darbar Hall, Sheesh Mahal, and Rang Mahal

The core of the Ramnagar Palace's painted chambers is found in the Sheesh Mahal, a royal mansion built on the plan of a traditional haveli, featuring a decorated entrance flanked by three grand, painted halls.[7, 34]

The Darbar Hall is a large chamber measuring approximately 46 by 18 feet.[7, 34] Its walls are decorated with large-scale frescoes painted in the Bandralta school of the Pahari style, focusing heavily on scenes from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* alongside portraits of the royal court.[7, 34]

Adjacent to this lies the Sheesh Mahal (Palace of Mirrors), which features elaborate cut-glass work and mirrors integrated into the plaster.[7, 27, 36]

The walls of this chamber are decorated with portraits of *Nayikas* (poetic heroines) that follow the Basohli and Jammu styles, showing slender figures with large, expressive eyes.[7]

The third hall, the Rang Mahal, contains detailed, small-scale paintings arranged within arched niches, illustrating complex epic narratives alongside historical military campaigns. [7, 34]

Hiru Mistri and the Execution of the Darbar Hall Murals

According to local oral traditions, the primary artist responsible for the exquisite murals in the Darbar Hall was *Hiru Mistri*, a master craftsman from the nearby village of Suneeta.[35] Hiru Mistri belonged to the *Tarkhan* (carpenter) caste.[35]

This detail highlights an important aspect of Jammu's indigenous art [3, 23]: the finest classical paintings were often drawn from hereditary, regional artisan communities who merged academic techniques with local folk styles.[3, 23, 35]

Hiru Mistri's skill is clearly visible in the major paintings in the Darbar Hall, such as the masterwork titled "Vishnu and Lakshmi". This mural is divided into two distinct spatial zones, separated by a painted representations of palace walls. The foreground is rendered in crisp, luminous white, depicting the interior of a heavenly pavilion. Here, Vishnu sits enthroned under a canopy with Lakshmi, wearing an ornamental crown (*mukuta*) and holding his traditional attributes—the mace (*gada*) and the lotus. To the lower right, the deities Shiva, Brahma, and Krishna stand in reverent poses, aligning the scene with classical Puranic hierarchy. The background of the mural uses deep indigo blue to create an illusion of open, natural space. The surrounding landscape is painted with stylised green and yellow trees, winding white clouds, and small, distant palace towers that establish a three-dimensional perspective. The architecture of the pavilion itself is an interesting hybrid. Its roof features a prominent dome with a finial (*kalasa* and *stupi*) reminiscent of eastern Indian temple styles. At the same time, the top of the shikhara features a red and gold canopy (*chatterwali*) typical of Sikh architecture. This hybrid design demonstrates how Jammu's nineteenth-century artists naturally blended different architectural and cultural styles within their work. Another key mural in the Darbar Hall, "Dancers in Suchet Singh's Palace," showcases the secular courtly life of the period. Raja Suchet Singh is depicted sitting on a detailed blue carpet with gold designs, smoking a traditional hookah under a red silk canopy. He wears an elaborate gold and red royal dress, a white turban decorated with a royal plume (*kalgi*), and holds his sword in his left hand. Around him sit family members and

courtiers holding their ceremonial shields and swords. In front of them, two young dancers perform, accompanied by court musicians playing the *tabla*, *sarangi*, and *khartal*. The scene is lined by palace guards wearing a mix of traditional Dogra armor and British military uniforms, capturing the changing political and military life of the nineteenth-century frontier.[35]

Epics and Empire in the Rang Mahal

In the Rang Mahal, the thematic focus shifts from courtly romance to martial epic.[7, 34]

The walls are divided into small, arched niches that are covered in detailed paintings. Here, the artist illustrates the battle scenes of the *Mahabharata* alongside the actual military campaigns of Raja Suchet Singh. These murals are remarkable for their high density of detail. Within spaces of only a few square feet, the artist depicts thousands of miniature figures, including armored cavalry, war elephants, foot soldiers, and heavy artillery on wheeled carriages.[7]

This pairing of epic and historical events serves a clear political purpose. By placing the military achievements of the Dogra rulers directly next to the heroic exploits of Arjuna and Rama, the murals construct a visual genealogy of power.[7, 11]

The ruler is framed not merely as a local political figure, but as a modern guardian of *Dharma*, operating within the same cosmic framework as the epic heroes.[11]

Visual Syncretism and Political Legitimacy under the Dogra Dynasty

The nineteenth century was a period of rapid political transformation across the western Himalayas.[11, 16]

Following the collapse of the Sikh Empire in the Punjab and the signing of the Treaty of Amritsar in 1846, Maharaja Gulab Singh established the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. The new state was a highly complex administrative territory, bringing together diverse populations of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Buddhists across different geographic zones.[11]

Temple Murals as Diplomatic and Political Instruments

Under Gulab Singh's successor, Maharaja Ranbir Singh, the state initiated a broad program of cultural and religious revival.[11, 16]

Rather than focusing on a single, exclusive religious identity, the Dogra court pursued a policy of visual and intellectual syncretism to build political legitimacy over their diverse subjects. Ranbir Singh established translation departments where Sanskrit pandits and Muslim maulavis worked together to translate classical scriptures into Persian, Urdu, and Dogri. The *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* policy is clearly visible in the temple murals of the period.[11]

The Vaishnava shrines of Sui Simbli and Burj contain detailed narrative scenes from the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavata Purana*, celebrating the royal lineage of Rama, from whom the Jammu Dogras claimed direct descent.[11, 30]

However, alongside these classical Hindu scenes, the temple walls feature prominent, full-scale portraits of the first Sikh Guru, Guru Nanak Dev, and the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. This visual inclusion of Sikh sacred figures was a calculated political move. This syncretism is further highlighted by the inclusion of Perso-Islamic mythological figures within these Vaishnava temples. The murals include detailed depictions of Solomonic *peris* (angels), the winged steed *Buraq*, and characters from Persian epics, such as Rustam fighting the demon Div Akvan from Firdausi's *Shahnameh*. By presenting these diverse visual traditions within a single, unified architectural space, the Dogra court created a new visual language of pluralism. The temple walls functioned as a diplomatic medium, presenting the sovereign as a universal guardian of all religious communities within the state.[11]

Preservation Vulnerability and Post Independence Art Conservation

The wall paintings and frescoes of the Jammu region represent an invaluable component of India's artistic and intellectual history.[1, 3]

Through their complex narrative strategies, detailed mineral chemistry, and mandalic spatial organization, these murals successfully translated the abstract, cosmic wisdom of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* into public, architectural spaces.[1, 3, 4, 5]

They did not operate merely as passive records of the past, but as dynamic tools for state-building, diplomatic accommodation, and community-led devotion.[8, 11]

Despite their immense historical, spiritual, and aesthetic significance, these wall paintings face severe conservation challenges [3, 6]. Because many of these temples remain active, living monuments, the frescoes are frequently subjected to accidental damage, soot from ritual lamps, and structural renovations [3, 6, 29]. Many key murals have been buried under layers of white-wash or have decayed due to water moisture and plaster degradation.[6, 26] To safeguard these invaluable epistemic repositories, a comprehensive, postcolonial framework for conservation is urgently required [3, 6, 12]. This strategy must move beyond passive documentation to implement active scientific preservation.[6]

By combining physical archaeological investigation, digital photo-preservation, and a deep study of traditional Sanskrit and regional texts, we can ensure that these vibrant symbols of Jammu's living heritage continue to inspire, educate, and connect future generations to their rich history and spiritual traditions.[3, 6, 26, 29]

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