

Krishna Playing Flute: A Chambā Rumāl at the Lahore Museum

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This study is based on the collection of Chambā Rumāls in the Lahore Museum on the Mall road, Lahore. The survey has been taken in the Textile and Ethnological Gallery of the Museum which houses these beautiful specimens of embroidery belonging to the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The craft belongs to a hill state of Himachal Pradesh, India. This research is a documentation of this dying art which is losing its beauty thread by thread with the folding pages of time. The present condition of some is vulnerable and close to complete decay. The twenty-one beautiful specimens uncover the culture, religious values and history of the area they belong to. The study encompasses the history, subject matter, intrinsic and extrinsic analysis of the specimens at display in the show cases as well as those stored in the storage area of the museum. Illustrating some scenes from the Indian religious mythology, the rumāls appear to be small textile miniature paintings. The compositions are according to the shape and sizes of the base fabric whereas the drafting techniques are very close to those of the miniature paintings produced in the same era. The research further connects the similarities in drawing, motifs and subject matter of the miniature paintings and rumāls at Chambā, a hill state of Himachal Pradesh.

Key Words: Chambā Rumāls, Lahore Museum Collection, Himachal Pradesh embroidery, Chambā Miniature Paintings.

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“According to the Hindu belief, on hearing the music of Krishna’s flute, pea- cocks dance and other animals stand still and worship him with their glances, celestial maidens flying

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in their aerial cars above the earth become infatuated with him and shower him with flowers, rivers become smooth- running and offer him lotuses, and in the beat of the day clouds let fall on him their cooling rain.” (“Hinduism: Why Lord Krishna selected ‘Flute’ as an Instrument?”, 2015)

In Hinduism, the symbolism of flute is related to the human body. In order to make a flute, first the pulp inside the flute is completely removed. The body of the bamboo stick further suffers the pain when the holes are made by the maker (god) then alone it can become a flute and give melodious music of all sorts. The technique is simple yet painful. Similarly the human body needs no extraneous fittings to spiritually progress, but it must bear the sufferings of tests and bear with them firmly, then alone one may become a flute like being and be blessed to be touched and played by the lips of a divine being (“Hinduism: Why Lord Krishna selected ‘Flute’ as an Instrument?”, 2015). If a person can get rid of his ego and become like a hollow reed flute, then the lord (god) will come to him/her, pick the person up, put his lips and breathe through that person and out of the hollowness of his or her heart, the captivating melody will emerge for all creations to enjoy. But if one will continue his attitude of dislike, hatred and jealousy, the lord will distance himself from him or her, since the person will be useless for his purpose (“Hinduism: Why Lord Krishna selected ‘Flute’ as an Instrument?”, 2015). The body is thus compared with the flute of *Krishna*. If one can destroy the egoism and make total self-surrender, he will play on the body-flute nicely and bring out melodious tunes, righteous deeds. The body becomes merged in *Krishna*’s will and the divine will itself works through the body. The flute in *Krishna*’s hands stands for each individual who may become a devotee like the *gopis* (Kinsley, 1975).

The flute has eight holes, using which divine music is brought out by the player. Eight is the number of Indian god *Krishna* (Bhattacharya, 1996) the eight holes control the eight parts of body and mind: eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, mind, intellect and the ego. *Krishna*’s flute is the symbol of Freedom. This flute attracts the devoted *gopis*, to meet their beloved as the sound of it thrills the hearts with rapturous delight and instil new life and joy. According to Hindu belief it produces god-intoxication in all beings, animals and infused life even in lifeless objects. They are no more masters of themselves, the world is nothing to them. They feel irresistibly drawn towards *Krishna* as there is a soul-awakening in them (“Hinduism: Why Lord Krishna selected ‘Flute’ as an Instrument?”, 2015). The love that the *gopis* bore towards *Krishna* is a divine love. It is the union of souls and not the body. *Krishna* has preached ‘Love’ through his flute. The

Hindus believe that *Krishna* has created this world out of the music that proceeds from his flute. He stands on the right big toe on a lotus flower which is the symbolic representation of universe.

Rādhā asked *Krishna*: “*O my dear! Why do you love the flute more than me? What virtuous actions has it done so that it can remain in close contact with your lips? Kindly explain to me, my lord, the secret of this. I am eager to hear*” (“Hinduism: Why Lord Krishna selected ‘Flute’ as an Instrument?” , 2015).

Krishna said: “*This flute is very dear to me. It has got some wonderful virtue. It has emptied off its egoism before I began to play. It has made its inner hollow quite void and I can bring out any kind of tune, Rāga or Rāganī, to my pleasure and sweet will. If you also behave towards me in exactly the same manner as this flute, if you remove your egoism completely and make perfect self-surrender, then I shall also love you in the same manner as I love this flute.*” (“Hinduism: Why Lord Krishna selected ‘Flute’ as an Instrument?” , 2015).

Krishna is depicted in many paintings and *Rumāls*, adept in playing on his flute, with blooming eyes like lotus petals with head decked with peacock’s feather, with the figure of beauty tinged with the hue of blue clouds, and his loveliness charming millions of Cupids, *gopis*, birds and animals. The flute by his enchanting musical sound attracts the hearts of all living beings. Flute is the oldest musical instrument known to mankind. A bamboo flute is the only musical instrument which is most natural and does not contain any mechanical parts. This is the reason the flute is very close to Nature and sounds very melodious when played in an atmosphere surrounded by Nature (Kinsley, 1975, pp. 32-55). For example, if you take a short flute to mountains or a thick forest and then play, the echo of the sound bouncing back is simply very delightful. Every flute player in such circumstances receives a celestial experience. It seems like Nature actually talks back to you. With the music of flute the birds start chirping through their singing. Flute has been mentioned in the *Purānas* which were written thousands of years ago (“Hinduism: Why Lord Krishna selected ‘Flute’ as an Instrument?” , 2015). Flute along with Mouth Organ is one of very few instruments which are portable. One can carry a short flute in your pocket and can carry it anywhere with ease unlike most other instruments which are very bulky.

‘*Once, lord Krishna asked his devotees what they would like to become in his hands. Some said the lotus, some the conch, some the chakrā and so on, but no one mentioned the flute. Krishna advised them to become his flute.*’ (“Hinduism: Why Lord Krishna selected ‘Flute’ as an Instrument?” , 2015) .

According to Sufi Inayat Khan, “*Krishna* is pictured in Hindu symbolism with a crown of peacock feathers, playing the flute. *Krishna* is the idea of divine love, the god of love. And the divine love expresses itself by entering in man and filling his whole being. Therefore, the flute is the human heart, a heart which is made hollow, which becomes a flute for the god of love to play (Khan, 1978). When the heart is not empty, in other words when there is no scope in the heart, there is no place for love. Rumi, the great poet of Persia, explains the idea more clearly. He says the pains and sorrows the soul experiences through life are holes made in a reed flute, and it is by making these holes that the player makes out of a reed a flute. The heart of man is first a reed, and the suffering and pain it goes through make it a flute, which can then be used by God as the instrument to produce the music that he constantly wishes to produce. But every reed is not a flute, and so every heart is not His instrument (Arasteh, 2013).

Art closely followed poetry and literature, making for a truly divine combination, and the scenic beauty of the *Pahāri* Hills, north of India. A beautiful collection of embroidered handkerchiefs or *Rumāls* from these hills is housed at the Lahore Museum, Pakistan (Figure 1). A specimen or *Rumāl* from this collection title ‘*Krishna playing Flute*’ accession no. 298, depicts the theme in a very beautiful way (Figure 2). The beauty of the scene is that it is not painted but embroidered by hand on a plain off-white cotton cloth. It belongs to the nineteenth century. The *Rumāl* belongs to *Himachal Pradesh*, popularly known as *Dev Bhūmi* or *Deva Bhoomi*, abode of the gods. The term “*Himachal*” is derived from Sanskrit language, *Him* meaning “snow” and *Achal* means “lap”, named so due to the abundant snow fall during the winter season. Located in Northern India, *Himachal Pradesh* is bordered by Jammu and Kashmīr on north, Punjab on west and south-west, *Haryāna* on south, *Uttārānchal* on south-east and Tibet on the east (Figure 3). It is a mountainous region, known for the natural beauty of its forests, rivers, valleys, hills and rich natural resources (GajRāni, 2004, p. 109).

The *Rumāl* under discussion is among the collection of twenty-one beautifully hand embroidered pieces displayed in the ‘Ethnological Gallery’ of the Lahore Museum (Figure 4). They are named after the hill-state of *Chambā* at *Himachal Pradesh*, thus they are known as *Chambā Rumāls*. The beautiful hill state of *Chambā*, continued a craft with exquisite needle paintings, so finely embroidered that an underside cannot be distinguished. They have embroidery done on fine linen and cotton with silk thread. A *Chambā Rumāl* is a cotton scarf or small shawl of a particular size embroidered in specific stitch pattern, usually satin and outline stitch, in silk thread and decorated with specific motifs and

themes. Natural dyes are used for the dyeing of the silk thread. These *Rumāls* are mostly square in shape (2' x 2' or 4' x 4') but a few examples of rectangular shapes measure 2' to 6' are also known (Khurshid, 1988, p. 3). These are given to the young bride with blessings. Besides their normal use, these were also presented to important persons on the occasions of their visit to a village or estate (Naik, 1996). Despite its geographical name, *Chambā Rumāl* embroidery is not confined to the *Chambā* state only. It is practised in several hilly areas and is still in use in various parts of the sub-continent e.g. Baluchistan and Sindh Province in Pakistan and Kathiawar in India, preserved in private collections.

The delicacy of the *Pahāri* art was heavily based on the weight of the *Krishna* theme. Exotic symbolism was recreated by the imaginative painter. The beauty of the female, the hilly landscape, the river valleys, its rivulets and streams, terraced fields and trees brought *Krishna* alive, living his delightful life, as one of the dwellers of the village. The *Rumāl, Krishna Playing Flute*, depicts this theme on a fabric sizing 17 x 15 ¼ inches. The scene depicts *Krishna* in the centre leaning by a tree, playing his musical flute to two gopis, one on each side (Figure 2). Two cows are at the bottom of the figures, enclosed within a floral border. The charming landscapes and freshness of style can be seen by the central tree with delicate leaves attached one by one to thin stems and flowing trunk. The human body needs more naturalistic study as the faces have dull expressions, beady eyes, squat and static bodies, pinched faces ending in double chins, long narrow eyes and round protruding nose as seen in early Kāngfā style of Indian Painting (Singh, pp. 80-89). The costumes consist of high-waisted *pairahan* with long narrow *ordhani* (Singh). However the rhythmically swaying tender branches with leaves in many shades of green creates a pleasant contrast. *Krishna* is shown standing in the characteristic posture of holding the flute, wearing a necklace and head dress like a semi-circular helmet upon a crown, showing hair locks on his forehead. The Blue colour of *Krishna* has an interesting philosophy. Blue is a word that is moderately useful towards describing the transcendental colour of the supreme personality of *Krishna*. Here is a more elaborate description: imagine a mountain of dark-blue sapphire. It would be almost jet-black. Now imagine the sun rising behind that mountain. That is something to give a clearer idea of the color of *Krishna*; very black, but with a blue brilliance. Black is the color that attracts light absolutely, and no light bounces off a

black object. *Krishna* is all-attractive in Indian art. Therefore he is black, every energy is completely attracted to him and never departs from him. The curls of his locks fall on his shoulders freely, while the birds, lotus blooms, peacocks and dark clouds create the perfect romantic setting (Bhattacharya, 1996). He wears earrings, sacred thread crosses his shoulder, drapery further developed with sash going downwards to the knees. His yellow *dhotī* has been bordered with red border. He is standing under a tree and playing the flute while his position is a bit off the centre towards the upper portion of the *Rumāl* in the composition.

The central tree appears to be willow (Figure 2). Willow is the tree of enchantment, symbolic of life's rhythm, changing cycles and adaptations of growth (Tree Symbolism Ancient and Mystical Teachings, 2015). There are two *gopis* and two calves listening to him. Each *gopi* stands on either sides of *Krishna*, holding feasts for their lord. One on the left as seen by the viewer hold a tray of fruits and the other holds a vessel of water or milk. The dresses of the *gopis* have been well designed with colourful and geometrical motifs. They appear to be quite abstract in terms of textile designing. Both the ladies face the central *Krishna* figure, mesmerized in his music. The dress of the *gopi* on left side of the *Rumāl* has elaborate geometrical design in horizontal lines going parallel with each other on her *ghāghrā*. The design comprises of small squares and zigzag lines. It is a very modern combination of motifs in a balanced colour scheme of red, blue, green and tones of yellow. The more creative element is the vertical red lines on her shirt like *choli*, which continues till the cuffs starting from the round collar. It is a fashionable dressing enhanced with plain blue *dupattā* on the head. Less jewelry and more designing marks a new turning point in *Chambā Rumāl* embroidery. She wears only an armpit and a necklace that seem visible. The other *gopi* wears a comparatively less elaborately designed dress but the style of embroidery stitch has enhanced a textured quality over her *ghāghrā*. The red, yellow, green and blue vertical stitch gives a warp-like effect to the design. These are filled with filling stitch in horizontal lines going parallel across the *ghāghrā*. Her shirt like blouse is in vertical lines as seen in the former *gopi*, the difference being that these ones are in a beautiful cool green tone enhanced with bluish jewellery. The figure has been further softened by a soft coloured pale *dupattā* on her head.

The typical *Chambā Rumāl* style of black outline stitch around all motifs and figures is intact in this *Rumāl*. The overall condition is better than the rest of the *Rumāls*. It is unfortunate that the diversified collection of textiles has been facing difficulties in terms of preservation of the delicate fabrics. Their fragile conditions have deteriorated with the passage of time. All the elements are clearly visible in this sample and the background fabric is quite intact except the top right portion of the *Rumāl* as seen by the viewer. Whereas in some cases the entire silk thread of the embroidery has been eaten up by insects and it has vanished leaving behind only arks of the tracing. The *Rumāl* has four very stylized cypresses made diagonally in all four corners of the border. They act like single *boti*, motif. Cypress: is the tree of faithfulness, symbolic of “strength and adaptability.” The beauty of trees teaches humankind that everything is part of Creator (Tree Symbolism Ancient and Mystical Teachings, 2015). The trees, the air, the grass, the summit of the mountain, the thunder beings, the sky and rhythm of the sea, the stars and brightness of the moon, are all interconnected. The Cypress recalls the freedom of the forest and invites one to leave the attachments behind, settle in a quiet place and be free. The trees seem to convey to the humans to come to them and press their palms into the bark and feel strength running through the body. Being still and listening quietly, being transplanted is possible with the flute, music, and natural environment of the forest. The spirit feels free in this divine atmosphere. Two calves, rather bigger in size as compared to the human figures thus can be considered to be cows stand at the bottom of the three figures facing up looking at their lord, the milk lover (Figure 5). Cows represent power and fertility and the provider of the favourite drink of *Krishna* according to the Hindu mythology, the milk. They seem ready to serve their lord with the powerful tasty drink. Moreover, as *Krishna* was a cow herd man, cattle around him also got spell bound with his flute’s music. Overall the scene is very well composed and the distribution of colours is beautiful. A stylized colourful floral border runs on all four sides with round bellied flowers with curving stems. The colours of the dresses have been repeated in these chains of beautiful floral designs. The bottom line has small dotted chain which divides the scene from the border, embroidered along the edge.

The same kind of compositions and themes can be seen in *Pahāri* murals (Figure 6). In the example *Krishna* plays his flute to the mesmerized *gopis* and animals. The theme and composition seems to be famous among the *Pahāri* people for whom the notes of *Krishna*’s flute drifting through the woods is the call of the divine.



Figure 1: The Exterior view of the Lahore Museum, Pakistan. (Established: 1865-66) Location: The Mall road, Lahore city, Province of Punjab, Pakistan. Photograph by the Author.



**Figure 2: *Krishna Playing Flute* (Acc. No. FBR-298)
Dimensions: 17 x 15 ¼ inches; Medium: Silk Thread Embroidery on Cotton
Date: 19th century
Source: Lahore Museum, Pakistan
Photograph by the Author**



Figure 3: A view of Chambā State, Himachal Pradesh.



Figure 4: *The Fabric Gallery of Lahore Museum (below)*
Location: Lahore Museum, Mall road, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.
Dated: 10th January, 2014
Photograph by the Author



Figure 5: Detail of lower part of the rumal.

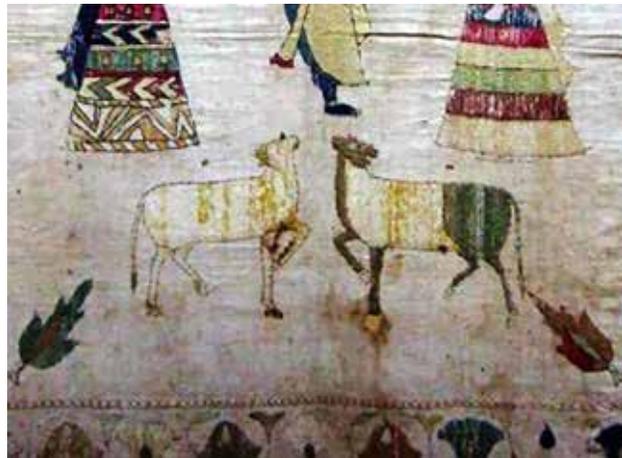


Figure 6: Similarity in Postures and Positioning of Figures (below)

Title: Krishna Under a Tree Fluting to Two Gopis.

Location: Raghunath temple, Burj.

Medium: Mural on walls

Source: Sukh Dev Singh Charak and Anita K. Billawaria. Pahāri Styles of Indian Murals. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1998. Plate no: 187.

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