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Syncretic Souvenirs: An Investigation of Two Modern Indian Manuscripts

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SYNCRETIC SOUVENIRS:
AN INVESTIGATION OF TWO MODERN INDIAN MANUSCRIPTS

by

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INTRODUCTION

Beneath the Humanities Building at Scripps is a trove of eclectic, unidentified art objects from the college’s early years of collecting. Between shelves lined with daggers and contemporary Japanese pottery, an innocuous pile of cloth-bound books lay untouched until they were relocated to Denison Library. This project began unexpectedly in the spring of 2017 when an art conservation course I was enrolled in took a field trip to the basement to look at the un-catalogued, more esoteric side of the college’s collection. The purpose was to look around at objects at our leisure to consider objects that were either fake, modern versions of artifacts, or authentic artifacts that had been removed from their original cultural context, leaving them shrouded in mystery. Although I had been in this basement many times before, I always managed to find a new treasure. In the midst of my browsing, I came across a pile of scrapbooks that struck my fancy. Once I had flipped through these I reached towards the back of the shelf to recover a thick, compact book with a nondescript, stained floral cover. Anticipating another scrapbook, I was shocked when I opened it up to reveal a series of brightly painted illustrations and a script I did not recognize. Without a plan for any further course of action, I returned the book to its shelf and made a note of its location.

The tiny book in the basement haunted me for months. Its inherent mystery had piqued my interest and I was desperately curious to figure out what its vibrant contents were. On top of that, it plagued me that this beautiful little book was moldering in a basement. It seemed dubious that anyone before me had paid it much mind. The thought that it could be in even worse condition by the next time someone stumbled up on it was devastating. By a stroke of good luck, I was able to intern at the Ruth Chandler
Williamson Gallery on campus that summer and they were more than willing to let me research objects in the collection. The opportunity came at last where I could rescue my mystery book from the darkness and give it the overdue attention it had long deserved. The hours spent in the basement led me to discover a second manuscript hiding in a pile of tissue paper on a top shelf. With the gallery’s blessing, I extracted them from the basement and spent the summer trying to figure out as much as I could about this peculiar pair of tiny books.

These two tiny volumes are illuminated manuscripts, containing miniatures of scenes from Hindu texts. These curious little books have no accession information. Their place of origin, date of creation, and collection history are completely shrouded in mystery. Discussions with experts in Indian, Islamic, and Asian art have led me to the conclusion that they are both Indian objects, created between the 19th and 20th century, presumably from a Northwestern region of the subcontinent such as Rajasthan. This places it within the tradition of Rajput miniature painting, an indigenous Hindu style that evolved between the 16th and 20th century, contemporaneously with the Islamic Mughal Empire and British Raj. It was discerned that one text is written in Devanagari, a common script that is used for over a hundred other languages but, in this case, is used for Sanskrit. The other is in a script called Sarada, an obscure Kashmiri script that is not commonly used in most parts of India.\footnote{References to the script have been spelled Sarada or Sharada. There is so little scholarly literature on this script that I have been unable to confirm which spelling is preferred.} The text written in Devanagari is the \textit{Bhagavad Gita}, which is a popular chapter from Indian epic, the \textit{Mahabharata}. The Sarada text is still unidentified. However, its paintings feature a number of popular Hindu deities,
including Durga, Vishnu, Ganesha, and Brahma, providing a vague context for the contents of the manuscript.

After an exhaustive search through countless databases, collection catalogues, and illustrated volumes to find a stylistically comparable manuscript or an established category these mysterious little books could be perfectly lumped into, I have concluded that no such category exists at this time. To clarify: these two manuscripts do not fit neatly into generally studied historical categories because they were created at a particular moment in time in which many aspects of those categories were evolving. Typically, Indian art is situated within an empire or time period that had a well-defined style and system of patronage. The fact that these manuscripts are modern means they fall outside the realm of art historical conventions. Since they are not ancient Mughal or Rajput masterpieces, neither commissioned by a king, nor the modern product of British intervention, they are outside a conventional, art historical field of interest. This is an unfortunate dismissal, since these two manuscripts are objectively the by-product of a long, syncretic history of cultural exchange. These unassuming little manuscripts represent a category of Indian art that has not been extensively studied. They embody artistic influences from the Hindu Rajputs, the Islamic Mughals, and the British Raj. The combination of these diverse cultures provides a window into a particular moment in Indian art history.

The objective of this project has been to shed light on these two Hindu manuscripts by fitting them into the historic context of manuscripts and minitature painting in India and determining how conservation efforts can ensure a long future for them at Scripps. First, this thesis will unpack the history of Mughal, Rajput, and British
artistic practices to identify how factors such as style, construction, and patronage evolved over time. By the 20th century, Indian artists had begun to seek out new styles as they embraced modernity. These manuscripts appear to be a hybrid of pre-modern styles that predate this shift. The second chapter will dissect the two Scripps manuscripts in the context of these traditions. While the iconography can be interpreted within a strictly Hindu context, the style and construction evoke a number of different influences. Namely, the style of the miniature paintings fall within the context of the Rajput tradition while the construction utilizes both Rajput, British, and Islamic processes. Finally, the concluding chapter will delve into the potential future of these manuscripts. The manuscripts have been highly damaged over the years, so the need for structural conservation is critical. It is also crucial to consider the overall status of Indian manuscript conservation and why these particular manuscripts are worth preserving. Although it might seem that all artifacts inherently deserve treatment, most collections are forced to pick and choose due to limited time and resources. These fragile manuscripts deserve attention because they are a unique glimpse into a moment between modernity and tradition. They are the culmination of a complex, diverse history of artistic practices and devotion in India.
CHAPTER 1: Cross Cultural Context of Indian Manuscripts
The History and Syncretism of Hindu, Islamic, and Western Traditions

I. Introduction

The history of intermingling culture and artistic traditions in India is complicated to say the least. Even before the arrival of conquerors and colonizers, the subcontinent hosted numerous diverse religious and cultural traditions. Typically, this history can be consolidated into three main periods: Ancient India, the Mughal Empire, and British Raj. Categories of art making often overlap with multiple time periods in Indian History due to the fact that the many cultural groups in India occupied adjacent regions and did not exist as separate entities. Thus, it is very difficult to encompass artistic traditions in a singular movement or culture. The focus here will not be on rigidly defining the manuscripts under investigation. Instead, it will explore how the cumulative history of cultural groups in India led to the hybrid design and construction of these artifacts. For the sake of this project, the historical focus will be on the evolving design of Indian painting and manuscripts in terms of both aesthetics and construction. It will also outline how evolving systems of patronage led to shifts in artistic styles and introduced new materials into artistic practices.

An extensive body of scholarly literature has been written on South Asian manuscript traditions. While this covers a plethora of specific topics, broad categories of studies typically include Hindu, Jain, or Buddhist traditions, illustrations under Mughal patronage, and later art practices that stemmed from imperialism and modernization.

Stuart Cary Welch and the American Federation of Arts. Room for Wonder: Indian Painting during the British Period, 1760-1880. (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1978): 14. At the time of British occupation there were “600 native states, 222 vernaculars, and 14 major languages.”
under the British. These manuscripts incorporate elements from all of these religious and cultural categories without perfectly fitting into any one. Since these manuscripts are hybrid of Hindu, Islamic, and Western traditions, they are a distinct type of artifact that falls between ancient and modern categories. Therefore, the focus of this chapter will be on the complex history of cultural syncretism that shaped Indian art and how these manuscripts embody the variety of traditions that stemmed from this mixture of influences. By detailing these influences, this project will confront the dilemma of categorizing modern manuscripts that defy traditional divisions.

II. Painting in India

The most widely studied aspects of Indian manuscripts are the vivid, painted illustrations, called miniatures. Although these particular images are quite small, the name references the minute detail in the paintings, rather than their scale. In the context of these two manuscripts, even though their date of creation has been narrowed down to relative modernity, they are still the by-product of both internal and external influences over the course of several centuries. Miniature paintings in India were created for a wide variety of different patrons, ranging from British officers to Islamic emperors to Hindu kings. Based on the iconography within and the fact that text is written in Sanskrit, rather than Arabic or English, it is easy to determine that the contents of these books are distinctively Hindu.

The history of Indian painting is quite broad. Hindu artistic traditions originated from pre-Mughal periods and then continued simultaneously while the country was under Muslim, then British Christian authorities. Early on, Hinduism made its mark through wall paintings, eventually progressing into transcribing their beliefs into writing that was
accompanied by illustrations. There is even evidence that during these ancient periods there was some resistance to transcribing oral narratives into written word due to their sacredness. In the end of course, there was a large output of written texts and miniature illustrations over the centuries in many regions of the subcontinent. Initially, Hindu manuscripts were created on strips of birch bark or palm, with paintings and text intermingling on the same plane. Later on, during the reign of the Mughals, elaborate miniatures on vertical sheets of paper were popularized. Hindu patrons countered this trend by producing their own miniatures in their own style. A number of factors indicate that this pair of manuscripts is far from ancient, particularly in regards to their material properties, which are discussed below. It is worth noting, however, that they are the product of a longstanding tradition.

In terms of categorization, the miniatures in the manuscripts under consideration most closely fit into the tradition of Rajput painting. The term “Rajput,” coined by the renowned Indian art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, refers to both the name of the regional rulers who acted as patrons as well as the style itself. By Coomaraswamy’s definition, this style emerged in the 16th century and lasted until the 20th century. These miniatures are inherently religious. Their source material included literature, poetry, and religious texts, all from a Hindu cultural background that was indigenous to India.

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3 Alexandra Soteriou. Gift of Conquerors: Hand Papermaking in India. (Middletown, NJ: Grantha, 1999): 23. “Hindus’ commitment to an oral tradition may have kept an early desire for paper at bay. Theirs was a culture in which the very sound of a word was sacred.”


5 Ananda Coomaraswamy. “Rajput Painting.” Museum of Fine Arts Bulletin 16, no. 96. (1918): 50. Although the 16th c. to the 20th c. is a generous time frame, he adds, “Scarcely anything of importance has been introduced since 1825.”
Miniatures with these themes were generated in the northwestern regions of India, specifically at the Hindu courts within Rajasthan and the Punjab Hills. Although the Rajput rulers eventually ceded their power to Mughal rulers, these regions managed to maintain a certain degree of autonomy in their artistic practice throughout the country’s tumultuous history of leadership. It was in these regions that Hindu religious art was allowed to most consistently develop. Famously, the Mewar kingdom was able to steadfastly resist assimilation into the Mughal courts. As an act of defiance, the ruler Rana Jagat Singh (R. 1628-52) commissioned an elaborate series of manuscripts illustrating the tale Ramayana. Everything about these manuscripts, from their Hindu content, non-naturalistic, monochromatic style, and horizontal alignment, was in opposition to the miniatures produced by the Mughal court ateliers. These incredible miniatures are extolled as the finest examples of Rajput painting.

Stylistically, Rajput miniatures are defined by their vibrant colors. Most often the compositions are executed in bright red, yellow, and green. The backgrounds of the scenes are flat planes of color. Many later Rajput paintings tend to have red or orange painted borders around the illuminations. Occasionally a wall or throne might make an appearance, but Rajput paintings consistently embody an abstracted sense of space and landscape. The figures are rendered sharp profile, faintly outlined, with massive lotus

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6 J.P. Losty. The Mewar Rāmāyaṇa Manuscripts. “Mewar and Gwalior, to the north-east of Rajasthan, were the two leading centres of Hindu culture in north India in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, but were destined to be overrun by the armies of the Muslim Mughals.”

7 Agre, Jagat Vir Singh. “Social Life as Reflected in the Rajput Painting During the Mughal Period.” Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, 37. (1976): 570. “The treatment of the human beings, animals, and birds is symbolic and unrealistic. The 2/3rd or Savachasm faces of human beings, is a peculiar feature of these paintings; and angularity is present in the delineation of the face line.”
shaped eyes. Shading is notably absent. There is no clear light source nor darkening, and no sense of depth, just swatches of colors. The objective in this style was not naturalism. Symbolism manifested itself in the choices of color and the stylization of characters made them recognizable. All of these elements are visible in the Scripps manuscripts, which is a signifier that they owe some influences to these painters.

Although it may seem that the issue of categorization has been resolved, it is worth noting that Rajput painting is not as distinct a movement as Coomaraswamy often expressed. As early as the seventeenth century, when the Mughals advanced into northern India, Rajput painting did not exist as a distinct entity. Especially in regards to the Scripps manuscripts, which may have been created as late as the 20th century, it is critical to acknowledge the influence of Islamic and Western conquest on the evolution of Hindu styles. In most Western studies of Indian miniatures, the Mughal Empire often steals the spotlight, which can be a detriment to the accomplishments of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain artisans. However, Rajput painting was contemporaneous to Mughal painting and their development cannot be interpreted separately. Naturalism and secular content, the distinguishing characteristics of Mughal art, were never fully adopted by Rajput painters. Political affiliations between Mughal and Rajput rulers led to crossover between Islamic and Hindu painters, leading to the subtle incorporation of Mughal elements in Hindu art. Though this period of cultural intermingling is not incredibly apparent in the miniatures under investigation here, which were created long after the Mughal Empire, it is crucial to acknowledge that Rajput painting was not a purely indigenous tradition. It varied highly by region and by contact with non-Hindu, non-Rajput courts.

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Finally, it is important to note the impact of the British on the tradition of Hindu miniatures. The East India Company had permeated the subcontinent for quite some time before the fall of the Mughal Empire in 1857\(^9\). During the British colonial period, the thematic content of miniature paintings was suddenly shifted to fit with the interests of the British imperialists. The outcome of this influence was a significant shift in subject matter and a new movement of sponsored Indian art, commonly referred to as Company Painting\(^10\). The religious tolerance that the Mughal Empire had upheld for the Hindu population since the reign of Akbar dissipated with the arrival of highly conservative British groups\(^11\) in the mid 19\(^{th}\) century. Though earlier British occupants often assimilated into Indian culture to some degree, Victorian visitors made a concerted effort to discourage iconography that they viewed as “monstrous”. It can be inferred that this active discouragement led to a decrease in artworks with Hindu iconography. The patronage that Islamic artists had enjoyed under the Mughal courts also faded away, leaving many artists adrift. These court painters in particular found themselves under the wing of the colonial administration. British civilians living in India were enraptured by India’s exotic beauty and, rather than attempting to replicate it themselves, they would

\(^9\) Stuart Cary Welch and American Federation of Arts. *Room for Wonder: Indian Painting during the British Period, 1760-1880*. (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1978): Although the Mughal Empire had been on the way out for quite some time, 1857 is the most definitive end date. It was the year the final Mughal emperor was exiled from the country.  
often rope in Indian miniature painters for their artistic errands\textsuperscript{12}. The British army and civilian inhabitants took advantage of local traditions to assign duties such as mapmaking, portraiture, and landscapes. Suddenly the themes in art shifted from religious texts and court paintings to a forced interest in naturalism and the picturesque. Essentially, many Indian artists adopted European conventions and traditions. After the exit of the British in 1947, Indians found themselves struggling to define their artistic identity, leading to a wave of modern art that was largely divergent from traditional craftsmanship\textsuperscript{13}. Illuminated manuscripts became a thing of the past as modern artists explored more contemporary mediums.

Since the texts and imagery present in the Scripps manuscripts are obviously Hindu, it seems safe to say that they cannot be categorized as Company Paintings. The practice of Company Paintings is mainly worth noting, because it makes the existence of these books all the more unusual. As it has been mentioned previously, these manuscripts could have been created as late as the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, well after the arrival of the British. This makes these two manuscripts somewhat astonishing. They seem to fit into a window of time between British imperialism and Indian modernism, on the tail end of Rajput expression. It calls into question whom these manuscripts were created for and why their manufacture was supported in a time when production of Hindu manuscripts was on the decline. It would be unusual for a Westerner to commission a Hindu religious text. The texts are written in Devanagari and Sarada scripts, which would be of little use to most


English speakers. This suggests that the patron of this work was local and that the books were for some form of personal use. Although the British were indubitably in command during the period of the Raj, they did allow some Indian princes to maintain their title and a sense of jurisdiction. These princes were by no means patrons like Rana Jagat Singh but it would make sense if they chose to utilize their status to produce personal, devotional treasures like these. If indeed they were sponsored by an upper class devotee, it makes the circumstances under which these two manuscripts were brought to the United States all the more elusive. It does, however, provide the rationale for their creation.

III. Material History of Indian Manuscripts

In addition to the history of patronage and style that surrounds miniature painting, the materiality of these manuscripts is also critical to understanding their history and significance. In the context of construction, bookbinding and papermaking provide the most information about the history of these manuscripts. More minute details of these particular manuscripts, such as the pigments and cloth cover, also provide clues about their provenance. All of these features evolved rather drastically due to the arrival of the Mughals and the British. Since the works under investigation are not just miniature paintings but bound manuscripts, it is worthwhile to investigate their overall physical properties in addition to the style of their contents.

14 Thomas Metcalf. *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain’s Raj.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989): 105. “As junior partners in the imperial enterprise, accorded a secure place within Britain’s Raj, the princes of India played a central role in its later nineteenth-century political culture… They devoted much of their energy to flamboyant assertions of ritual sovereignty and extravagant contests for symbolic precedence.”
In ancient periods of India’s history, manuscripts and accompanying miniatures were commonly created on palm leaves, birch, or other readily available natural materials\textsuperscript{15}. It was only after the arrival of the Mughals in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century that durable rag paper became available. The Mughals deserve a great deal of credit for the dispersion of fine craftsmanship and new cultural ideas across the subcontinent. In particular, the Mughals can be credited with introducing the codex form of bookbinding and handmade paper into India\textsuperscript{16}. Prominent Mughal rulers, such as Akbar (R. 1556-1605), accumulated expansive libraries and were frequent patrons of miniature painters, leading to a flourishing artistic tradition\textsuperscript{17}. Rather than focusing on the miniature paintings produced for the Mughal courts, which bear very little stylistic resemblance to the Scripps manuscripts, it is more helpful to take a technical lens to the artistic accomplishments of the Mughals. The naturalistic, historical paintings of Islamic courts that prevailed during the Mughal Empire have very little in common with these distinctively Hindu illustrations that exclusively feature religious iconography in flat planes of color. In the context of the two Scripps manuscripts, material studies are far more significant than aesthetic comparisons. Skilled papermakers, bookbinders, and illustrators followed the Islamic path of conquest across Asia and ultimately it was their legacy that left a mark.

The dispersion of handmade paper, now commonly referred to as Islamic paper, and case bound books began in the Far East and came over to India with the conquerors


\textsuperscript{16} Alexandra Soteriou. \textit{Gift of Conquerors: Hand Papermaking in India}. (Middletown, NJ: Grantha, 1999): It is important to recognize that the majority of papermaking traditions that the Mughals introduced in India were actually invented in Central Asia. The Islamic conquerors were primarily responsible for the movement of these traditions.

around the 15th century. This was due in part to the migration of skilled papermakers and Persian illustrators. Papermakers, referred to as Kagzi18, often resided in northern areas like Kashmir and Punjab, due to the availability of natural resources like water and the fact that these northern regions aligned with the path of conquest and trade. Indian painters and calligraphers also had their beginnings in Kashmir. Islamic sultans summoned the majority of these individuals from Persia where miniatures were already widespread.19 Many categories of Hindu and Islamic miniature painting do not include Kashmiri traditions, so it is crucial to acknowledge that they were historically involved in the production of artistic materials, particularly since one of the Scripps manuscripts makes use of a Kashmiri script.

The most distinctive features20 of an Islamic style binding are the envelope fold around the cover and the colorful silk end bands.21 The end band was a structural innovation that strengthened the typical link stitch used between folios, while the envelope cover’s function has more to do with protecting the contents. Both of these characteristics appear on the Scripps manuscripts. Islamic book covers are typically done in leather. If the binding style on the Scripps manuscripts was strictly an Islamic design, the cloth cover would be an anomaly. Since it has already been taken into consideration

19 Alexandra Soteriou. Gift of Conquerors: Hand Papermaking in India. (Middletown, NJ: Grantha, 1999): 49-50. One interesting, although somewhat tangential, story of migration involved Timur, the King of Samarkand, who took painters and calligraphers from Persia. Timur imprisoned the son of a Kashmiri ruler who brought a group of craftsmen back to Kashmir with him when he was freed.
20 See Figures 1-6 in Appendix 1 for examples of cover construction and endbands.
that this is a conglomeration of many cultures and styles, we can safely assume that the
cloth cover falls outside the realm of Islamic designs. There was a flourishing tradition of
textile production in India that predated the British and was in high demand in Western
markets. While this printed cloth may have had its origins in an indigenous Indian
community, there is also the possibility that this cloth cover is a Western commodity. If
indeed these manuscripts were created after British occupation, then it is a distinct
possibility that this cloth was created using non-traditional, industrial processes or
imported from a foreign source. In either case, the choice of a cloth cover is quite distinct
from a traditional leather-bound Islamic manuscript. If it is an industrial produced cloth
it may have been used simply as a less expensive alternative to a material like leather. On
the other hand, if it was produced using traditional processes, it might subtly represent a
sense of national pride.

It is important to recognize that this shift towards a colonial authority had
widespread ramifications, even in the context of artistic traditions, such as bookbinding,
miniature painting, and papermaking. The British induced an Industrial Revolution that
upended traditional methods of creating materials that had been developed since
medieval periods. Though the Indian industrial revolution surely had some benefits in the
day-to-day lives of the original communities there, it had a devastating effect on the
material culture of the country. Modernization led to mass production and the distribution
of cheap, machine-made paper. The number of Kagzi families practicing their craft in
nearly all regions plummeted. The intense manual labor, associated with hand-

22 John Guy, Deborah Swallow, and Victoria and Albert Museum. Arts of India, 1550-
23 It is also worth noting that the use of leather might have been offensive to a Hindu
owner if their beliefs included a focus on minimizing harm to animals.
papermaking, such as beating pulp, became a form of punishment in prisons. Only a few individuals, such as accountants, continued to commission handmade paper for their books, probably out of a lingering commitment to tradition. Other cheaper materials such as watercolors and synthetic dyes were introduced into existing artistic practices. The availability of cheap, mass-produced materials, such as paper and pigment, ended traditional papermaking practices and led to the production of far less durable artworks.

IV. Historical Shortcomings

There is an unfortunate trend in which scholars of Indian art cut off their historical categorization of Hindu manuscripts around the 19th century with the underlying claim that no Hindu art of worth was created beyond that point. A number of implications lie behind this dismissal. One notion ties into aesthetics and personal preference. Craftsmanship arguably declined by the arrival of the British, since the miniatures generated after this point were not as skillfully rendered as the ones that came before, and from a Western point of view there was no point in investigating them further. There is a blatant Western preference for Mughal art, which means that Rajput, or any other more indigenous religious art, was often entirely dismissed. Pervasive myths of authenticity might also reinforce this claim: the idea that “authentic” Indian art had been eliminated over the course of centuries by Mughal conquerors and British colonialism. However, the

24 Alexandra Soteriou. Gift of Conquerors: Hand Papermaking in India. (Middletown, NJ: Grantha, 1999): 48. “The Mughal Craft Tradition in the Punjab area [was] disrupted during the late 1700s and through the 1800s [by] British industrialization and efforts to shift papermaking to the jails where labor was free.”


26 Partha Mitter. Indian Art. (Oxford History of Art. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.): 100. “Many of these [manuscripts] were produced with cheap materials, their calligraphy and painting bereft of elegance.”
most unfortunate implication of these claims is that any semblance of traditional Hindu art had been completely obliterated after British left their mark. This, of course, is blatantly untrue, as evidenced by the existence of the Scripps manuscripts. Objectively, they may not be as masterfully rendered as ancient Hindu manuscripts, yet they are still worthy of interest and appreciation.

The reason this is worth mentioning is that many collections that house Indian miniatures do not showcase ones that look like the two manuscripts that are being examined in this study, which has made it incredibly difficult to fit these manuscripts into a clear context. More often than not, if collections do possess these relatively modern, unidentifiable manuscripts they are not the pride of their collection. At best they are awarded an entry in a museum’s online database, providing one illumination with no mention of the rest of the book it occupies, or once occupied. An additional pitfall is that many finer examples of Indian manuscripts were dismantled for their miniature paintings, either during periods of conquests or by greedy collectors. The rest of the text, binding, and cover were discarded. It is quite fortunate that these two manuscripts are still intact, in their entirety, but this history of destruction makes it even more difficult to contextualize the material culture of Indian manuscripts. They are often no longer manuscripts at all but a lost sheet of paper with even less context than these two books.

V. Conclusions

Although the exact origin of these two manuscripts is still unknown, this history of materials, conquest, and iconography does establish a meaningful context into which they fit. It can easily be inferred from the iconography in the miniatures that both are Hindu religious texts. The fact that they were created on paper, not birch or palm,
confirms that they are not ancient. Both aesthetic and material properties prove that they are modern, presumably from the late 19th or early 20th century. The traditional craftsmanship and Hindu iconography however distinguishes them from contemporary Indian art and even early modern styles such as Company Paintings. Stylistically the two manuscripts follow in the footsteps of Rajput painting, meaning they are almost indisputably from the northwestern regions of India such as from Rajasthan or the Punjab Hills. The presence of Islamic papermaking techniques and bookbinding elements, such as the envelope flap, clearly indicates that these two books were created after the Mughal Empire had introduced these techniques into the country. If synthetic or mass-produced elements were used that would reinforce the theory that these books were produced during or after the British Colonial period. Thus, we have established a historical and cultural context in which these manuscripts were produced.
APPENDIX 1 - Manuscript Construction

Figure 1: Cover with an envelope flap. Unknown Artists. *The Sarada Manuscript* (Tentative Title). 19th-20th c. Scripps College, California.

Figure 2: Cover with an envelope flap. Unknown Artists. *Bhagavad Gita*. 19th-20th c. Scripps College, California.

Figure 4: Islamic Headband and secondary cloth fabric on the Sarada Manuscript.

Figure 5: Diagram of an Islamic headband. Karin Scheper. *The Technique of Islamic Bookbinding*. (Netherlands: BRILL, 2015): 57

Figure 6: An example of an Islamic headband on an Indian manuscript from 1913. Karin Scheper. *The Technique of Islamic Bookbinding*. (Netherlands: BRILL, 2015): 143.

Figure 7: Detail of the leather supports and cloth spine lining in the Sarada Manuscript.

Figure 8: Diagram of the technique of sewing on leather supports. Karin Scheper. *The Technique of Islamic Bookbinding*. (Netherlands: BRILL, 2015): 75.
Figure 9: The binding structure and headband remnants on the Devanagari Manuscript.

Figure 10: Diagram of a link stitch on two stations.
CHAPTER 2. The Scripps Texts

An Analysis of Construction, Iconography, and Style

I. Introduction

With the complex history of modern manuscript traditions in India established, it is possible to move on to a more focused investigation of the two manuscripts at hand. The context established in the prior chapter surrounding the material history and evolution of styles in Indian manuscripts can now be applied to these volumes for further understanding of their history. This analysis will highlight distinctive characteristics of the two Scripps manuscripts in the context of history and traditions, specifically with an emphasis on their construction, iconography, and aesthetic characteristics.

These two manuscripts are so similar in style that it is necessary to establish a terminology to discuss them. The manuscripts are written in two distinct scripts, each with their own underlying cultural significance. One manuscript is written in Sarada\textsuperscript{27}, a script used for Kashmiri and Sanskrit, while the other is written in Devnagari, a script more commonly used throughout India. The Devnagari script has been identified as the \textit{Bhagavad Gita}. Translating the Sarada manuscripts has proved to be a monumental task, as there are very few people who can read this script. For now, it can only be tentatively described as a text related to the worship of the goddess. For the sake of distinguishing these two manuscripts, they will be referred to with a name that corresponds to the script

\textsuperscript{27} “Sarada Script: Writing System.” \textit{Encyclopedia Britannica}. “Sarada script, writing system used for the Kashmiri Language by the educated Hindu minority in Kashmir and the surrounding valleys…Originating in the 8th century ad, Sarada descended from the Gupta Script of North India, from which Devanagari also developed. Sarada script corresponds letter for letter with Devanāgarī, although it differs greatly in shape, having stiff, thick strokes. Muslims in Kashmir use a Persian-Arabic script, and much Kashmiri literature is written in Sanskrit with the Devanāgarī script.”
they are written in, as is this the most distinctive difference between them. When referring to both books as a unit, they will be called the Scripps manuscripts.28

II. Manuscript Construction

The Sarada Manuscript

An envelope flap holds the volume snuggly closed. This is the first telltale sign of an Islamic influence, as the envelope flap is a distinctive feature of Islamic manuscripts. It is tiny but fat, stuffed to the brim with resilient paper. The format is horizontal, a characteristic that is subtly unusual. Manuscripts created under the patronage of Mughal courts were typically vertical, while their Hindu contemporaries commonly adopted a horizontal alignment that emulated the traditional style of palm leaf manuscripts. Already the contradicting influences are apparent. The horizontal alignment and iconography within, which will be discussed shortly, are Hindu features, but the binding style is notably Islamic.

Though the envelope flap is a distinctive characteristic of Islamic manuscripts, everything else about this little book’s cover belongs to another culture. Manuscripts bound in Islamic styles, particularly those with Islamic content, are traditionally bound in leather with a vertical cover. The pages of the text live within pasteboard covers, wrapped in a floral cloth. The cloth cover could be an indigenous tradition from the book’s place of origin. Printed textiles were a popular commodity in Rajasthan and other

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28 For further clarity, the images in Appendix 1 include images of the Scripps texts along with diagrams pertaining to construction methods.
northern regions of India\textsuperscript{29}. Alternatively, this cloth cover could be made from imported British materials, meaning it is simply a cheap alternative to higher quality materials.

Since this little book has lived in a moist basement for decades, perhaps after many more years of use and exposure to diverse climates, it has begun to deteriorate. On a positive note though, this damage has helpfully revealed the manuscripts binding structures that would have otherwise been invisible. The faded yellow cloth encasing the covers has curled back to reveal a second swatch of fabric along the spine. Although these two fabrics are clearly distinct, their design is comparable enough that a broader distinction in origin is not apparent. The purpose of this second cloth covering may have been an attempt at restoration, although it is debatable whether a professional or an amateur, such as an owner of the book, implemented it. Another revelation under the peeling spine is the headband structure. Two pink and white embroidered silk bands\textsuperscript{30} are sewn to the folios at the top and base of the spine. This structure perfectly matches diagrams of Islamic style headbands that appear in other texts\textsuperscript{31}. The interior pages have loosened slightly to reveal the binding structure below. The folios are bound on three leather cords, with a strip of cloth lining. Although this would not be considered a surprising binding style in Western manuscripts, it is a relatively uncommon trait in Islamic manuscripts. In her comprehensive study of Islamic manuscript structures,

\textsuperscript{29} Partha Mitter. \textit{Indian Art.} (Oxford History of Art. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001): 165. These fabrics were one of the East India Company’s more popular exports. They were made using hand techniques such as block printing and painting before the introduction of synthetic dyes in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.

\textsuperscript{30} Figures 5-7. See Appendix.

\textsuperscript{31} Karin Scheppe. \textit{The Technique of Islamic Bookbinding} (Netherlands: BRILL, 2015): 56-57. See the appendix for Scheppe’s diagrams alongside images of the manuscripts.
conservator Karin Scheper\textsuperscript{32} took a sampling of Islamic manuscripts to establish that this binding style occurred with some regularity in India but it was far less common than simpler stab sewing methods that were used elsewhere in the Islamic world. In her study, this type of binding does not appear at all until the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, perhaps coinciding with British rule, rather than the Mughals.

The manuscript is richly illuminated with vibrant, full-page miniature illustrations of recognizable Hindu figures. There is no shading on the figures and the background is filled with unidentifiable, colorful shapes. Many of the human figures are in profile while a few deities face forward at the center of the composition. Although the background of paintings may once have been red, it is orange in its current state. One intriguing technical detail of these miniature pages is that they are taped onto the previous page. They also lack the page numbers in the margin that the rest of the volume contains. This indicates that someone created these pages separately from the rest of the text. Brilliant carpet pages with golden illuminations follow the miniatures. The first section of the Sarada manuscript has decorative floral borders around the text. This trend ceases after the appearance of the first miniature though. The rest of the pages contain unornamented text, boxed in by thin, colorful lines drawn in watercolor. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these boxes provide another hint about the construction process. They continue for several pages after the final block of text, a sign that these lines were drawn first and text came second.

The implication behind this is that the decorative components of the manuscripts were delegated to a number of different artisans. One artist took responsibility for

painting these simple boxes then the more decorative borders at the front of the manuscript were added in later (and perhaps abandoned in the interest of time, since they only appear on the first seven pages). The fact that the pages of empty watercolor boxes continue well past the final page of text implies that the book was assembled and then the text was written in afterwards by another hand. Since the carpet pages and miniatures are taped in and have only been painted on one side, this indicates that they were created separately from the rest of the pages and then attached once the rest of the manuscript was completed. It can be taken for granted that the papermaker and bookbinder were distinct artisans from the painters, based the previous discussion of the role of Kagzis. This division of tasks also has roots in the Mughal system of court ateliers, where craftsmen would divide up the labor of creating manuscripts by their different skill sets. This system still appears to be in use for the creation of this much later, Hindu manuscript.

A few more interesting characteristics distinguish the Sarada manuscript. Traces of red seals appear sporadically in the Sarada manuscript. There is the possibility that these are a reference to the owner or the artist but they have faded beyond the point of recognition. Laid lines are visible on the paper even in dim light, an imprint from the screen that was used to produce them. Compared to the countless other manuscripts residing in archives and galleries, the hands that worked on the paintings and calligraphy were not the most adept. However, these lines are a testament to the quality of the paper that fills the book. In the back of the book is a table, perhaps an index. The symbols it

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33 Alexandra Soteriou. *Gift of Conquerors: Hand Papermaking in India.* (Middletown, NJ: Grantha, 1999): 118. Laid patterns are described as “fingerprints of each unique mold” that was used to lift paper pulp from the bath where it was mixed. Simply put they are “horizontal line impressions.”
contains correspond to the symbols in the marginalia of the rest of text. There are tiny inclusions of other languages as well though. An Arabic script makes a brief appearance throughout the text. One line in a third, unidentified script appears in the back of the text. An incredibly small, second set of symbols, occasionally cut off, appears in the corners of the manuscript. These could be annotations in a script more familiar to the reader or the signature of an owner.

The Devnagari Manuscript

The battered exterior of this second manuscript does not immediately draw in a casual observer. In fact, I overlooked it for several months after noticing the Sarada manuscript. It is peeling, torn, water damaged, and riddled with bookworms. It is an unsightly introduction to an otherwise very beautiful and intriguing volume. Like the Sarada manuscript, the Devnagari manuscript has an envelope flap and a cloth cover, this time dyed brown with a design that conjures associations of paisley. Unfortunately, the mild damage that was so enlightening on the Sarada manuscript is actually a major detriment here. If this text ever had a headband or cords as part of its binding structure, they are gone now with no visible trace of their existence. The entire spine has fallen away to reveal the simple stitch that holds the book together.

In terms of the interior, the manuscript’s ornamentation is somewhat simpler than the Sarada manuscript’s. The miniatures are fewer and far between: the Devnagari manuscript has 4 miniatures to the 16 that appear in the Sarada manuscript. There is no trace of gold in this volume. A colorful, patterned border frames the miniatures, but in this case a large portion of the page is not painted. While the Sarada manuscript showed

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34 The symbols in the index are Sarada numerals, and ultimately what enabled me to determine the language.
considerable variation in the decoration of its sheets, there is essentially no distinction between these pages. Hundreds of virtually identical pages are framed with orange and black boxes, filled with script in the same color palette. One interesting quality of this text is that the handwriting appears to change halfway through—it suddenly becomes much larger and fewer lines of text occupy the page. This could indicate that it is a composite text or simply that many hands went into creating a single volume. The first few pages of the Devnagari manuscript, those that are the most heavily damaged, are on browning, brittle paper. This could be an indication that this little book is made with imported British paper, implying that it was cheaply made and mass-produced. However, the better-preserved pages at the center of the book have laid patterns and the sheen of burnishing, which points towards handmade paper. The page numbers appear in the same style as before, only on the left page in the corner, but there are no additional symbols, marginalia, or an index.

III. Stylistic Comparisons

Although the decorative elements in these miniatures are fairly extensive, the flatness of the image makes it hard to decipher a sense of time or space. Rajput painting traditionally transcends the conventions of time and space, as it places an emphasis on color symbolism rather than naturalism. It is difficult to discern from this late, damaged manuscript whether there is an explicit symbolic message in the color choices, as the colors have corroded and the intention behind this manuscript is unknown. Still, the composition undeniably has stylistic parallels with earlier Rajput painting.

In the *Gita*, the background of the scenes is divided into swatches of olive green, vermilion, and pink, the ground a muted plane of red-orange. In a way this design
scheme corresponds fittingly to the abstract plot of the *Gita*, which occurs at a moment that in many ways exists outside of time. Three sides of the miniature are framed by a floral pattern that could be a distillation of a carpet page.\(^{35}\) While the red and yellow lines that box in the rest of the illustration can be attributed to Rajput design, this pattern could potentially be interpreted as an Islamic influence. This carpet page motif is present in the Sarada manuscript as well, even more prominently so. After each illumination is a gilded page of text surrounded by an elaborate blue and orange border. The illustrations in the Sarada manuscript are also more detailed than those in the *Gita*. Any blank areas around the illustration have been painted bright orange, forming a vibrant border. This convention of framing miniatures will bright swatches of color is another common trend in Rajput painting.

IV. Iconography

The contents of this manuscript are indisputably Hindu, based on the presence of recognizable figures like Ganesha and the Goddess. It is crucial to interpret the distinctive iconographies that narrow down the purpose of these books.\(^{36}\) As stated above, the Devnagari manuscript has been identified as the *Bhagavad Gita*, which makes its interpretation relatively straightforward. By contrast, since the Sarada manuscript has not been fully translated, it is only possible to speculate about the nature of the text through an analysis of the deities represented.

Sarada Manuscript

\(^{35}\) Carpet pages are a form of elaborate, geometric ornamentation in Jewish, Islamic, and Christian manuscripts.

\(^{36}\) For reference, Appendix 2 includes all the miniature paintings from these two volumes in chronological order.
As stated previously, the contents of this manuscript have not been definitely identified, so analysis on the illustrations will focus primarily on identifying the deities as they appear. Although the figures vary from page to page, the overall composition is fairly consistent through the manuscript: one of the gods or goddesses is seated in the center of the composition, framed by an arch, and surrounded by a crowd of attendants, other gods, or demons. One theory is that this is a Kashmiri Tantric text devoted to forms of the goddess, based on the variation in skin tone of the figures. However, the eclectic imagery makes it difficult to categorize based on iconography alone and the stiff arrangement of figures does not lend itself to interpretation as a narrative.

After a few pages of text, the first illustration is inserted with an illuminated page offering up praise to Ganesha, the elephant headed son of Shiva. Ganesha is painted in his typical orange palette, seated on a lotus flower throne with his legs folded beneath him. In each of his four hands he holds up an attribute, which in this case appear to be a lotus flower, an axe, a golden bowl, and a piece of jewelry. He is adorned with bracelets, earrings, and a golden crown topped with a black plume. A third eye in the center of his forehead is open. Four figures stand at his side, their hands clasped together in prayer, indicating that they are not deities themselves but rather human worshippers offering their praise. There appear to be three women dressed in matching skirts and robes that vary only in color. One man in a turban and yellow pants stands off to the right. Ganesha has associations with entrances and beginnings.\(^{37}\) His role here may have little to do with

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the overall contents of the manuscript. These written exaltations and depictions of devotees may be a sort of preface, evoking Ganesha as a starting point for the manuscript.

The following pages depict a colorful mixture of gods and goddesses standing in attendance around a central figure, seated either on a bright pink lotus like Ganesha or an animal mount. Initially the goddess character appears alone with a long, white fish at her feet. Alternatively, this character could be Shiva, due to the presence of a third eye and his ashen skin or the fish could connect to Vishnu’s fish avatar Matsya\textsuperscript{38}. Following this is an illustration of a ten armed, five faced, figure sitting on a swan. Each of the five faces is a different color, perhaps symbolizing the multiplicity of the gods embodied as one. A bearded figure stands in attendance with a flywhisk. The subsequent illustration depicts a figure styled in the clothing as the initial Shiva or goddess character but bearing different attributes, such as a pot and sword, with a snake at their feet. A group of five figures appears, kneeling and clasping their hands. A female figure arrives by elephant in the fifth illustration, surrounded by women in attendance. The culmination of these scenes could depict the summoning of the goddess Devi or Durga to fight the buffalo demon\textsuperscript{39}, a scene which appears shortly afterwards.

After one additional scene of worship where the goddess appears with sixteen arms riding on two lions, the following four scenes depict the main pantheon of gods

\textsuperscript{38} Heather Elgood. \textit{Hinduism and the Religious Arts}. (London: Cassell, 2000): 64. “The first two avatars [of Vishnu], the fish and the tortoise, are strongly linked to water symbolism. Mythology recounts the tale of the fish who saved the world from the great flood.”
\textsuperscript{39} Heather Elgood: 71-72. “Durga [is] described in the \textit{Devi Mahatmya} as a powerful goddess created from the combined anger of several gods. Durga is armed with the principle weapons of the major gods, the javelin of Agni, the trident of Sīva, and the discus of Vishnu. She rides a lion and confronts a buffalo which has been possessed by a demon.”
surrounding one central figure whose skin tone varies scene by scene. Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma, and Indra are all present, which does lead to the theory that the central figure may be the goddess in various forms since she is the most significant deity missing from this group. The two penultimate images shift the focus to Shiva, who is presented riding his bull Nandi and then with a consort on his throne, surrounded by multicolored beings in procession, playing horns. The final miniature is of Vishnu enthroned, with two attendants carrying lotus flowers towards him.

**Bhagavad Gita**

In short, the *Bhagavad Gita*, which translates to “the Song of the Lord,” is a tale from the epic *Mahabharata*. The plot focuses on the warrior Arjuna, who is about to face his family in battle and is overcome with remorse. Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu, converses with Arjuna in an attempt to convince him that he must not falter and should proceed into combat. Typically the text is interpreted as a consideration of the tenants of Hinduism and moral philosophy rather than a strict narrative. Miniature painting, however, depicts characters in action using familiar formulas so a reader can easily identify them. Analysis of these images is an interpretation of characters and plot, but it is important to acknowledge that broad concepts like sin and morality are the most important message of these texts. Due to the deterioration in this particular manuscript, the pages are detached and the miniatures that accompany the *Gita* text were somewhat jumbled. The subsequent descriptions follow the imagery in the order it appeared at the

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40 The identity of these deities can be inferred from their features. Shiva has a third eye and pale skin because he covers himself in ashes. Vishnu is identified by his blue skin. Brahma is recognizable by his many faces. Indra’s body is covered in eyes.
time the manuscripts were recovered but it may not reflect the order the miniatures were originally arranged in.

At the very front of the manuscript is a free-floating illustration that has become dislodged from the rest of the pages. This first miniature appears to depict Arjuna in a chariot driven by Krishna, one of the early scenes in the Gita. Arjuna’s sheath of arrows identifies him and his intent to go to war. Krishna is recognizable by his slate blue skin and the conch shell he carries, an attribute symbolizing the om and the origin of existence. It is an interesting decision to depict him with only two arms and one attribute. The choice to portray Krishna with this particular emblem of Vishnu may connect to the greater moral and philosophical lessons that this text embodies. He wears a yellow robe around his waist and is adorned by necklaces, bracelets, and a crown. An attendant carrying a banner leads the chariot ahead of two white horses. Arjuna and this attendant have nearly identical faces and outfits. Both are wearing orange tunics speckled with gold, both have a mustache and tiny red earrings. Only their turbans distinguish them—Arjuna’s is gold, this other character’s is white.

It is more difficult to interpret the course of events in the second and third miniatures. A number of different characters appear in these illustrations. In the second,

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41 Eknath Easwaran. The Bhagavad Gita. (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007). “Sri Krishna consoles and instructs Prince Arjuna as he is about to go into battle against family and friends to defend his older brother’s claim to the ancient throne of the Kurus.”

42 The om is defined as “a mystic syllable, considered the most sacred mantra in Hinduism and Tibetan Buddhism. It appears at the beginning and end of most Sanskrit recitations, prayers, and texts.”

43 Heather Elgood: 57. [Vishnu’s] four arms hold characteristic emblems such as the conch, discus, lotus, and mace. Occasionally one attribute is absent and instead one of Vishnu’s hands grants a boon or favor.” While it is possible that the absence of two attributes symbolizes a boon, it seems odd that two arms are omitted entirely rather than being present but empty.
Arjuna is brandishing his bow at a bearded figure that leans at a precarious angle, a white tendril emerging from his mouth. Krishna suddenly has four arms, brandishing all his attributes. Krishna disappears entirely in the next illustration. At the center of this composition is a new bearded man, whose face is more or less the same as the figure on the prior page, but his robe distinguishes him as a new character. This figure is seated tranquilly on a cushion beneath an orange tent, his eyes closed and one fist raised. In all likelihood this scene depicts Sanjaya, the narrator of the *Mahabharata*, kneeling before the blind king Dhritarashtra\(^44\), his hands clasped together as if imploring him or offering his respect. The attendant in the white turban stands to the side with a flywhisk. Sanjaya is practically identical to the figure of Arjuna in the first illustration, aside from the absence of a golden cloth over his shoulders. This calls into question why there is so little stylistic distinction between characters.

In the final illustration, Krishna reappears without any human characters. He is accompanied by his vehicle Garuda\(^45\), who is depicted in his anthropomorphic form as a man with a folded wing and a bird face. On the other half of the illustration is a white elephant that merges awkwardly with another green creature. The elephant appears to trod on the tail of this odd lizard-like animal while its leg descends into the gaping orange mouth of the unidentified beast.

\(^44\) Richard H Davis. *The Bhagavad Gita*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015): 37. “The dialogue of Krishna and Arjuna on the battle field of Kurukshetra that constitutes the *Bhagavad Gita* is observed by Sanjaya, an attendant at the Hastinapura court… Sanjaya dutifully reports this conversation and the entire battle to the blind king Dhritarashtra, father of the Kauravas, seated in the royal palace at Hastinapura, over a hundred miles from Kurukshetra.”

\(^45\) Heather Elgood: 57. “[Vishnu’s] vehicle (vahana) is the bird known as the garuda which is sometimes described as an eagle, falcon, or more accurately a Brahmany kite. Garuda has wings and a birdlike human head with a curved beak.”
V. Potential Provenance

Although the manuscripts did not come with an inscription or document that revealed their owner, painter, or patron, this analysis of their contents and construction reveals subtle clues about the history surrounding its creation. Its aesthetic properties date it to the 19th or 20th century. The miniatures clearly evolved from the tradition of Rajput painting, based on stylistic comparisons to other manuscripts, but they lack the same level of refinement as older examples. As mentioned above, interpretation of this text based on imagery alone is quite difficult, even with some pre-existing knowledge of Hinduism. The use of Sarada script is not unheard of but it is relatively uncommon. While all of these factors make it complicated to decipher the religious significance and iconography, they do provide some clues about ownership and patronage.

The previous chapter outlined the system of patronage that sponsored manuscript traditions in Mughal courts and Rajput provinces. Artists were commissioned by Hindu or Islamic rulers to create miniature paintings that depicted historical or religious accounts. High quality illuminated manuscripts were created for the benefit of the elite, not the common man. These artists often worked in guilds, delegating specific jobs such as drawing the boxes or writing the script to one specialized individual, employed specifically by a court. Most art historians argue that this system fell into a decline as the Mughal Empire lost its authority in India. In the context of these two manuscripts, it is curious that two Hindu manuscripts like these would have been made as late as the 19th or 20th century.

Without condemning their beauty, it does seem fair to say that the painting style is not quite as sophisticated as earlier Rajput paintings. The Gita miniatures have been
simplified and lack the level of intricacy that many Rajput paintings attained. While they are quite endearing, the rendering of the characters in the Sarada manuscript are not incredibly sophisticated. A number of historical elements could have influenced this change. The decline of courts and patrons was certainly a contributing factor. Not only did this mean there were fewer opportunities for artisans that had previously had the guarantee of a benefactor, it could have also meant a decline in training. It is well known that styles were copied and passed down over the years, often through families of artisans. With less demand for their craftsmanship, there may have been fewer artists trained to depict Hindu themes, particularly with the British now commissioning Company paintings that utilized more Western styles. Bearing all this in mind, it is worth considering who these manuscripts were made for and why.

Since these manuscripts come with no accession information or prior research, it is nearly impossible to know their exact provenance. These manuscripts took a journey from India to California and that too will have to remain shrouded in mystery. However, considering a few possibilities for their acquisition sets up a path for understanding their origin and the cultural context they fit into. There are several possibilities for why these books were created and how it ended up at Scripps. Since the binding and the quality of the paper indicate traditional methods of construction, it seems as though the manuscripts were created at the hands of the scarce artisans who maintained their craft. One possibility is that these manuscripts were created and sold as souvenirs for British and American tourists. Accession information from Scripps is limited but the evidence suggests that an American visited India in the early 20th century and brought these books home with them as trinkets. This theory only accounts for part of the story though.
VI. Conclusion

Obviously, Hinduism and its devotees did not disappear from the subcontinent, even if the traditional art forms that embodied it seemed to be fading in the wake of industrialization. Despite the middlebrow quality of the miniature paintings, the books do embody traditional craftsmanship and style. The paper is handmade, not mass-produced, which is a demanding process. The process of painting, writing, and binding was also fairly time consuming. Even if these books are not the most valuable examples of their kind they still took a considerable amount of time, effort, and collaboration to produce. It seems odd that this would be entirely for the benefit of a random tourist. It would also be unusual if the contents of the manuscript were catered towards an outsider to India and Hinduism. The Bhagavad Gita and Devnagari would be fairly accessible to a wide audience in India but not to a random Western passerby. It makes even less sense for the Sarada Manuscript, which is still utterly indecipherable after months of research, to be made for the benefit of an English speaker. The far more likely possibility is that an affluent Hindu patron, who could read Sarada and had a particular interest in this story, was the one who requested this. Eventually it must have passed from his hands and ended up in the possession of the American that brought it to Scripps. This is the conclusion to be drawn from an interpretation of its construction, style, and iconography. Despite the odds, traditional arts prevailed late into Indian history because someone still wanted a beautiful object that manifested their devotion.

The story is still hazy but a context for these specific manuscripts is beginning to make itself clear. The scripts, Devanagari and Sarada in particular, place the two manuscripts within loose geographic parameters. Given the variation in their degrees of
ornamentation, it seems safe to say that they were created by different artisans but not in drastically different locations or time periods. Within the historical framework of miniature painting, papermaking, and bookbinding in India, the Scripps manuscripts can clearly be situated within the cross-cultural context of Hindu, Islamic, and Western influences.
APPENDIX 2- Miniature Painting

Figure 1: Miniature Illustrations.
Figure 1: Miniature Illustrations. Unknown Artists. *The Sarada Manuscript*. 19\textsuperscript{th}-20\textsuperscript{th} c. Scripps College, California.
Figure 1: Miniature Illustrations. Unknown Artists. *The Sarada Manuscript*. 19\textsuperscript{th}-20\textsuperscript{th} c. Scripps College, California.
Figure 2: Miniature Illustrations. Unknown Artists. Bhagavad Gita. 19th-20th c. Scripps College, California.
CHAPTER 3. Conservation of Indian Manuscripts

Collecting, Ethics, and Treatment Proposal

I. Introduction

Now that the cultural history of Indian manuscripts has been established and the contents of these specific volumes categorized, it is crucial to consider these manuscripts in a different light. Their past has been analyzed and estimated, placing them within a context that allows for a sufficient understanding of their history and purpose. The next step is to consider their present state and ponder what the future holds for them. The present state of Indian manuscripts is comparable to the complex past that led to their creation. These manuscripts have suffered a substantial amount of damage over the years. Hopefully in the near future they will receive the attention they need to ensure their longevity. This final chapter will focus on the conservation of Indian manuscripts. It will outline potential treatments for these two manuscripts so they can be preserved for future use as well as a rationale for why these artifacts warrant consideration.

II. State of Conservation

One interesting dilemma to consider is the state these books were found in. The reason they did not receive better care up to this point was not due to neglect per se. They were simply forgotten in an unstable environment. While this may be a larger problem in collections beyond Scripps, it is difficult to say whether Indian manuscripts in particular suffer from neglect in Western collections. The state of manuscript conservation in India, however, has been studied. In 1995, INTACH (the Indian Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) conducted a survey on the status of manuscript conservation in India. Although it is entirely possible that the state of conservation has changed in the decades since, this survey was the most recent publication that summarized pervasive issues. The rationale
for the survey was the knowledge that manuscripts and other paper materials can be found in abundance but are often unaccounted for or are utterly neglected\textsuperscript{46}. The climate in India is not conducive to inattention- paper materials disintegrate quickly if they are not cared for. This necessitated a closer look into the state of conservation in both large institutions and private collections across the country. In the summary of their findings, INTACH suggested that there was a lack of specialized training and funding, which made it difficult to maintain collections even if their custodians had the best of intentions. Although a comparison between Western and South Asian conservation has not been explicitly drawn, there does seem to be a distinction in the level of available resources. In the west, specifically in Western Europe and the United States, conservation labs, training programs, and sources of funding have existed for quite some time, meaning they are more widely available to all collections. In regards to this project, this means that Indian manuscripts that made their way to the west have a better chance of receiving proper repairs and preventative treatment. There are even a number of prestigious institutions, such as the Chester Beatty Library and the Freer Sackler Gallery, that have their own conservation labs and focus exclusively on conserving Asian artworks. However, these collections often come with a sordid past that ties back to a long history of orientalism and destructive collecting patterns, so they are not without their flaws. The

\textsuperscript{46} Om Prakash Agrawal and S. N Sinha. \textit{Manuscripts, Books, Archival and Alike Material in India: Conservation Status and Needs.} (The INTACH Cultural Material Heritage Series, 9. Lucknow: INTACH Indian Conservation Institute, 1995): 1. “Several collections of manuscripts and documents are still lying about in bundles in a neglected condition. It is thus not possible to know the precise number of such materials. It has been found that most of such materials are deteriorating fast due to climactic conditions, improper storage arrangements, injurious insects, growth of fungus, dust, acidity in paper, mishandling, and neglect.”
issue at hand is that India’s climate is not ideal for conservation and its resources are too limited to properly care for the massive number of manuscripts that can be found within the country. Miniatures that made it out of the country had either survived extreme circumstances, like war, looting, and the destruction of libraries, or had been sold off when power and wealth declined. The manuscripts that found their way to the west via dealers, museums, libraries, and private collectors had endured quite a bit.

III. Damage

The damage these two books suffered provided an interesting glimpse into their construction and material history. Unfortunately, the damage is so extensive that they are in a fairly fragile state and could benefit greatly from the attention of a conservator. Ideally, in the near future, they will receive treatment from a qualified professional. For the time being though, this section will highlight the main areas of damage and propose a potential treatment plan.

What is particularly dire about these two manuscripts is the extent of the structural damage they have suffered. The Bhagavad Gita is in worse condition since its binding structure has completely fallen apart. The construction of the covers is simply fabric adhered to a pasteboard. Although the patterned fabric has its charm, the execution of the cover seemed rather weak to begin with. The brown fabric that covers the front and back of the book wraps around the edges of the boards, forming the spine. A second strip of cloth in a different, green pattern covers the interior of the board. The text block is attached at the end pages to this extraneous strip of cloth. Considering this patchwork of glue and paper is all that held the cover and text block together, it is not terribly surprising that the structure fell apart. The root of the problems seems to be at the broken
spine, which has ripped away from the back cover, taking the first signature with it and loosening the overall binding of the book. The headbands are in limp tatters. The folded edges of the pages and string holding it all together are in poor shape due to exposure and strain. Brown residue in these areas indicates that the cloth spine may have been attached with glue to the binding or that some sort of tissue once reinforced the structure.

The first signature is detached from the rest of the text block, leaving it exposed to the elements. Later signatures are only slightly discolored and worn down around the edges of the paper. This dislodged section did not fare as well. The pages are stained brown with grime. At first glance, this discoloration seemed to indicate that the entire book was created on cheap, industrial paper. Imported British paper is characterized by its brittleness and the yellow-brown pallor that reveals itself over time. However, in later pages that had been protected, faint laid lines were still visible to indicate the use of traditional papermaking processes. The first pages were so damaged by dirt and water that this quality was almost undetectable. This manuscript also suffered from a ruthless onslaught of bookworms. Bookworms are notorious fiends that feed on cardboard and paper, leaving gaping holes in their wake. Abstract patterns mottle the cover, revealing the places where the worms burrowed in. Sadly, the damage continues onto the first illustration, which is riddled with holes. The main areas of concern here are the ruined spine and the decaying first signature. The interior pages that held together managed to stay in relatively good shape.

The Sarada manuscript is still intact but has internalized a fair amount of damage. Its cover is due for some attention but it is in better shape than the Gita. The outermost cloth layer has become discolored and peeled up to reveal the layers below. The
pasteboard is considerably worn down and has begun to separate into layers of paper. Another layer, which appears to be holding the structure together, is a second patterned fabric. What is particularly interesting about this is the indication that the manuscript may have been re-bound in a second cloth cover, as an early attempt at conservation. It is also possible, however, that this strip of fabric is just a lining to reinforce the spine. Since there are gaps between the signatures that reveal the binding, it seems safe to say that the structure is a bit loose. Overall though, the manuscript’s structural stability is in decent shape since its initial construction was stronger than the Gita’s to begin with. The majority of the Sarada manuscript’s issues are due to water damage. Although the quality of the paper is still very apparent, it is stained yellow and has distinct waterlines where it absorbed the moisture. Black patches of mold dot the blank pages in the back. The watercolor lines have bled into soft clouds of color. The metal gilding in the illuminations has begun to seep through to the opposite side of the page, although it is unclear whether this is due to natural corrosion or the presence of water.

IV. Proposed Treatment

These manuscripts are in need of extensive treatment. While they could certainly benefit from the discerning eye of a trained, professional conservator, particularly one who specializes in South Asian paper works, the following section simply outlines potential steps that could be taken to improve their condition. This proposal is intended to provide an overview of suggested treatments rather than a strict guideline to adhere to.

A good rule for most conservation treatments is to begin with a non-invasive dry cleaning of the pages. Since these two manuscripts are visibly stained, just implementing this step could make a drastic difference. Most publications suggest beginning with a soft
brush and vinyl eraser that will remove dirt with minimal abrasion. Introducing water or a mild solvent seems too risky for these works since the moisture they have already been exposed to has caused the pigment to bleed and fade. It seems safe to say that the paint layers themselves are in need of treatment. Traditionally, paint was applied in thin layers with many stages of burnishing to produce a thick sheen. However, considering these manuscripts are fairly modern, this process might not have been carried out as extensively. Although flaking is not visible to the naked eye, it might be an issue since the paper support has suffered quite a bit of damage. The simplest method for counteracting this type of damage is to minimize the amount of movement the painting must endure. If it were determined that flaking was extensive enough to warrant more intervention, a binder could be applied as a protective coating.

In his work on the conservation of South Asian manuscripts, O.P. Agrawal outlines solvents that can be used to remove a number of common stains. Out of his extensive list, the most relevant suggestion is the use of ethanol to remove fungus marks. The spots of mold appear at the back of the manuscript on pages that are mostly blank, aside from the painted square template, so it seems less hazardous to introduce a solvent in those areas. The main prerogative is to remove the manuscripts from the humid environment that introduced the fungal growth, which has already been accomplished. In order to fully counteract the growth, fumigation is a possibility that should not have an adverse effect on the pigment, but this might be too involved a procedure. Re-housing

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47 O.P Agrawal,. *Conservation of Manuscripts and Paintings of South-east Asia.* (England: Butterworths and the International Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, 1984): 180. Agrawal suggests a “0.5% solution of polymethylmethacrylate in sulphur free toluene” or a “1% solution of polyvinyl acetate in sulphur-free toluene” as binders.
should also prevent any future insect damage. The existing holes can be mended with Japanese tissue and adhesive to strengthen the page.

V. Ethics of Conservation

Although it is crucial to consider the overall status of conservation and how these manuscripts might be cared for in the future, the most pressing question is why these objects should be conserved. In theory, it seems obvious that all damaged art objects deserve proper attention and maintenance. In practice though, conservation resources are fairly limited. In India and the west, collections must constantly pick and choose what objects will be prioritized for preservation since there is simply not enough time or funding to address every issue. This bleak generalization has particularly somber implications for these objects in particular and other modern Indian miniatures. Overall, there is a longstanding lack of respect for Indian art in Western collections, even though they took away many examples of craftsmanship from the subcontinent. Hindu art has been blatantly misunderstood for centuries. Additionally there is now an arguable lack of Western interest in studying Indian art history. It may not be demonized in the way it once was but there is notably less scholarship on it than movements initiated in or adopted by the west.

There also seems to be a hierarchy for appreciating the art of India. Islamic Mughal artwork typically garners the most attention while Hindu artwork is deemed worthy of attention only if it is ancient. Sculpture and architecture are often the most

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48 Gary Michael Tartakov. “Changing Views of India’s Art History,” in Perceptions of South Asia’s Visual Past. (New Delhi: Oxford Publishing Co., 1994): 17. “Histories of Indian art have changed over the years through the addition and refinement of information and development of conceptualizations, as antiquarian dilettantes gave way to more systematic analysts.”
exalted components of Hindu craftsmanship, but occasionally paintings created before
the fall of Mughals warrant some attention. In a nutshell, late Hindu miniatures usually
fall to the bottom of the pecking order. This means that modern Indian manuscripts and
miniatures are a low priority for art historians and thus for conservators as well. Bearing
all of these shortcomings in mind, we return to the question of why these manuscripts
ought to be preserved for future use.

For many, the significance of an object comes down to its aesthetic properties. It
has, unfortunately, been explicitly stated by a number of scholars that no Rajput paintings
of worth were created after the 17th century. The implication is that any later creations
emulating a traditional style were of an inferior quality. The only reasonable basis for this
assertion is that the quality of craftsmanship declined after the British introduction of
cheaper, less durable materials. An argument against the aesthetic properties of late
Hindu creations seems far too subjective to be substantiated. Since the objective of Hindu
art was to embody symbolic meaning and not to attain a certain degree of realism, it
hardly seems fair condemn modern miniatures for their stylistic qualities. The criterion
for Hindu paintings is whether or not they aptly convey religious meaning. The standard
for the execution of these paintings is more fluid. These two manuscripts are lovely and
fascinating but their late date of creation seems to place them into a broad category of
modern Indian art that historians declared aesthetically unworthy of appreciation. For the
sake of this argument, it seems too subjective to determine the significance of an object
purely on aesthetics, even if this is the basis of value for most collectors.

If beauty alone is not the primary motivation for preserving these manuscripts,
then what is their significance? Why does it matter if they are conserved? It seems as if
all the details of their history, outlined in the previous chapters, provide the answer to this
difficult question. These objects are significant because they represent the culmination of
centuries of conquest and the synthesis of many cultural influences. The Scripps
manuscripts serve as a window into how the complex history of the Indian subcontinent
led to the evolution of artistic traditions. As artifacts that fall in between major artistic
periods there are a number of different ways these books can be viewed. Since they are
neither Rajput nor Mughal nor Company paintings but bear traces of all of these patrons
these manuscripts are unique entities. They can be interpreted as the final form of
traditional Indian craftsmanship. Alternatively, they are reflective of the growing pains
Indian artisans must have felt as they found themselves torn between overbearing British
influences, residual Islamic and Hindu traditions, and a newfound desire to modernize as
a post-colonial nation. It seems as though these tiny books are worthy of appreciation if
they are considered to be the final product of diverse artistic and cultural exchange.

An argument can be made that these books are important for their religious or
devotional purposes. A definitive conclusion about their use prior to their appearance at
Scripps is difficult to ascertain. Based on the overwhelming use of South Asian scripts,
both in the body of the text and marginalia, it seems quite likely though that they were
not created as a souvenir for Western tourists. The use of the obscure Sarada script in
particular seems like an odd choice for a Western commission. A reasonable conjecture is
that these volumes were created for a Hindu patron who could read the texts and
appreciate the symbolism in the miniatures. The damage the books have suffered may be
due to improper storage or mishandling during its travels from India, but it is entirely
possible that it was worn away over time in the hands of a devout worshipper. Although a
souvenir is still reflective of interesting syncretism, there is a stronger moral basis for conserving a personal copy of religious text that was inexplicably removed from its place of origin.

There is also an inherent value in these manuscripts as complete objects that can shed light on evolving craftsmanship and artistic traditions. Many prized examples of miniature painting and manuscript pages have been removed from their folios or their history has been obscured by prior treatments. Although these books are quite damaged, the fact that no one has interfered with their construction means they do provide a good sense of what manuscripts must have looked like at the time. It also provides a context for what these deconstructed manuscripts must have looked like, assuming these older texts served as models for later volumes like the Scripps manuscripts.
CONCLUSION

There are a number of lessons to be learned from this investigation. It was established that the two manuscripts found at Scripps were modern Indian creations. Although their contents are Hindu they embody an array of influences and are a syncretic by-product of Western, Islamic, and indigenous Hindu traditions that evolved on the subcontinent for centuries. Both the style of the miniature paintings within and the method by which they were constructed reflect the hybrid nature of these volumes. An Indian prince or other affluent Hindu devotee presumably sponsored them around the time of the British Raj, between the late 19th and early 20th century. At some point afterwards, an American tourist purchased them as a souvenir, bringing them over to the United States in their possession. Eventually, they made their way into the collections at Scripps. A number of factors, including devotional use, the strain of travel, and the years spent in the basement, have left the two manuscripts thoroughly damaged. Therefore, the future of these books are in need of intensive care so they can be restored and survive for future use. Beyond these conclusions on aesthetics, materiality, history, and conservation, the overall message to be derived from this project is that these two manuscripts are worthy of interest and preservation. Their modernity and aesthetics should not be the primary indicator of their value. They are a fascinating combination of manuscript traditions from centuries of production. Modern iterations of ancient traditions are an under-represented area of study. Their completeness provides a perspective on structural features that may have been lost on older manuscripts. These objects are wonderful artifacts that have been woefully overlooked within the collection and the art historical world for far too long. They deserve their moment in the spotlight.
Bibliography


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