

The Basohli Idiom: An Abridged Study of Basohli Painting Techniques and Symbolic Colour Palettes

Dr. Dyutima Kesar¹, Divya Sharma², Anjali Sharma³

¹Research Assistant, P.G. Department of Education, University of Jammu

^{2&3}Research Scholars, P.G. Department of Education, University of Jammu

ABSTRACT

Colour is not merely descriptive; it is rather a vehicle for emotions, where deep reds and mustard yellows serve as the visual pulse of the narrative, elaborates **M.S Randhawa** on Basohli paintings. The stunning hills of Jammu have long been the cradle of visual revolution that defied the subdued naturalism of contemporary courtly traditions, and at the heart of this subdued beauty, lies the scintillating Basohli Painting, a product of the Basohli School, a style defined by its raw vitality, architectural boldness and an almost tactile richness. The Basohli style of painting is the wild child of the Pahari schools, characterized by its fierce intensity and the use of primary colours that seem to burn on the paper. **The Basohli idiom is not merely a regional aesthetic, but altogether a complex semiotic system where colour serves as carrier of emotional essence or Rasa.** While a lot has been said and documented about Jammu hill states, there remains a quintessential need for a concentrated technical and symbolic analysis of the Basohli's school unique methodology. The whole idea of this current research paper is to bridge the gap between historical documentation and technical analysis by explaining the specialised processes and techniques used by Basohli masters, decoding the chromatic symbolism and altogether presenting the synthesis of style and story by evaluating the Basohli idiom as a unique form of narrative art that translates poetic metaphors into high-contrast visual drama. The present paper seeks to exhibit and highlight the enduring richness of Basohli art, positioning it not just as a relic of the 17th century, but as a masterpiece of indigenous technical and aesthetic innovation.

Key thematic pillars: The Materiality of Art, The Semiotics of Colour and Symbolism

The Materiality of Art: This thematic pillar focuses on how physical ingredients such as the beetle-wigs and other minerals used in the paintings reflect the socio-economic and spiritual values of Jammu.

The Semiotics of Colour and Symbolism: The present paper attempts to decipher why certain colours are used and assigned to a specific mood or deities in the Basohli context and it also covers the highly conventionalized representation of colours hinting to a symbol of communication.

Introduction

Collectively known as Pahari School of Painting, Basohli Art or Paintings carry a robust and an enigmatic expression. Emerging from the small principality of Basohli under the patronage of **Raja Bhupat Pal (1678-**

1693), this Basohli idiom exudes a seismic shift in the Indian aesthetics landscape. Basohli, (*earlier called, Vishvastahli*), is a town, nestled in the Kathua district of Jammu and Kashmir, India, is renowned for its unique school of miniature paintings. Founded in the 16th century by Raja Bhupat Pal, Basohli has a rich artistic heritage, with its painting style, known as Basohli paintings, being considered the precursor to the Pahari painting schools. The Basohli paintings, celebrated for their striking and emotive colors, bold lines, and distinctive facial features, experienced their golden age during the 17th and 18th centuries. *These pictures were called "Basohli paintings" for the first time in the Archaeological Survey Report for 1918-19, published in 1921.*

Despite its acknowledged importance and an official and independent Geographical Indication (GI) tag in April 2023, known for its intense colours and intricate depictions of the Hindu mythology, the Basohli idiom is frequently treated as a “primitive” precursor to the more “refined” later Pahari style of paintings and art. **This research paper also challenges a linear progression by arguing and bringing to light that Basohli style was completely realised,** sophisticated system of symbolic pattern and palette with a beautiful system of communication. Through analysing the bits and pieces, the present paper synthesizes the intersection of its chromatic choices and **deciphers the “Basohli Idiom” as a deliberate aesthetic choice, that immensely favours the spiritual and emotional resonance of the subject over mere representational accuracy.**

The Historical and Cultural Crucible

Picture 1

Map of Kathua District in Jammu Division



Basohli Art is a confluence of diverse influences. It has inherited the bold lines and flat backgrounds of the early *Chaurapanchasika style and the Malwa school*, yet it infused them with a distinct and enriched local vitality born of the Jammu hills. **Basohli school is a product of melting pot of ideas of a plethora of Mughal style of painting, Gujarati style of art, along with traces of Deccan heritage and culture.** Despite its initial prominence, the Basohli style later gave way to the *Guler painting tradition, another significant school in the Pahari region.* The Basohli School did not merely illustrate texts; it also acted as a visual conduit for the

Bhakti movement and the sophisticated erotic- devotional poetry of the 17th century. The greatest and seminal works of this era include *the Rasamanjari* (*The Bouquet of Delight*) and *the Gita Govinda* (*The Song of the Cowherd*), gave a narrative framework through which the Basohli artists explored the complexities and exuberance of the human and the divine love.

Decoding Basohli Art's Aesthetics and Patronage

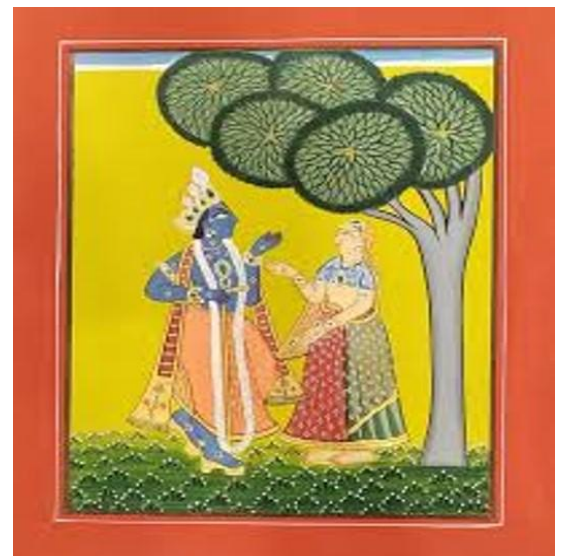
From Basohli, the style spread to the hill states of **Mankot, Jasrota, Nurpur, Bilaspur, Kulu, Kangra, Chamba, Guler and others**. As the style spread, variations due to local conditions developed, resulting in the growth of several new schools of Pahari Paintings. Some masterpieces of the Basohli School are in the prestigious museums, art galleries, palaces and a number of other prominent places across the hill states, India and the world. **The Pal Dynasty of Basohli leads to the revival and development of traditional Basohli Painting Craft.** All the Pal rulers played a catalytic role in the promotion of Basohli Painting Craft.

But the time period of **Raja Kripal Pal (1678-1693)** was considered the vibrant period for the revival, development and promotion of Basohli Painting Craft. It was during his time period that a more mature in style and expression type of artwork emerged in Basohli Paintings Craft. He encouraged local artisans toward the fine art of already existing Basohli Paintings Crafts with theme based on Hindu Mythology and Religious Text like *the Ramayana*. What truly defines and distinguishes Basohli Art and Paintings from its neighbours and contemporaries such as Kangra style and Guler Schools is its uncompromising vigor, whereby the Basohli look is chiefly characterised by its physiognomy of intensity, the architectural framing and its monochromatic horizons.

(i) The Physiognomy of Intensity: The figures are identified by receding the foreheads and large, expressive *almond- shaped eyes* (*fish- eye*) or as we say (*Mrignaini – the deer eyes*), which extremely dominates the face and project an aura so intense and full of passion.

(ii) Architectural Framing: The compositions often utilise the bold architectural attributes like *monolithic pillars, drawing of serrated windows, arches* that are stylised to compartmentalise the narrative and focus the viewer's attention on the theme and the protagonists.

(iii) Monochromatic Horizons: The backgrounds in the Basohli art are typically rendered in flat, with scintillating monochrome washes often used with *mustard yellow colour or deep cinnabar red* that wonderfully serves to push the figures forward into the viewer's psychological space and brings the art turn into reality.



The Alchemic Palette of Basohli Art

The visual richness embedded in the Basohli Art and its paintings cannot be subdued and is a result of a unique material process and a sophisticated range of materials like mineral and organic pigments including *Peori (Indian Yellow) and Vermillion (Sindoor)*. The hallmark is the application of iridescent *green beetle-wing fragments* where these small lustrous pieces are meticulously cut and pasted onto the paper to represent emerald jewellery or the shimmering eyes of the deities, creating a three-dimensional, jewel like effect that remains unparalleled in the history of Indian miniature art and paintings of Pahari style of art.

Basohli Paintings are replete with the Hindu mythology characters and folk art of the Local Hills (inclusive of Dogra folk art, Dogra traditions and folklores). The themes include *portraits of local rulers, local traditions and environment, Devi Series* (it deals with the *Bhadrakali a supreme deity*), *Hindu Religious Texts like the Ramayana and Bhagavat Purana (it deals with the life of Lord Krishna)*. *Ragamala Series* (Paintings depicting a range of musical melodies known as ragas) and *Rasmanjari Series* (it concentrates the love theme of *Nayaka and Nayak, Shiv & Parvati, Ram & Sita, Radha & Krishna*) and the *Gita Govinda Series* (it deals with the songs of Lord Krishna).

Signature Style and Idiosyncratic Style of Colours

Basohli Paintings are handmade miniature paintings to be held in hand and read closely, **characterized by 8"x12", 9"x13", 8"x7" and 9"x7" predominating sizes**. Now a days these Paintings are mostly available in 8"x12", 9"x13" and 9.5"x13.7" sizes. And followed by mounting and framing width and length increases by 4" (depends upon Artisan and customer). Besides this as per demand artisans also go for bigger sizes and even smaller too. Basohli Paintings are known for its exquisite beauty characterised by the **use of stone colours and the colours extracted from the leaves of the beetle-wig plants**. The colours are evocative with **ochre yellow, brown & Green background predominating and red, yellow and blue in the borders**. Basohli Paintings are characterized by the **use of original gold and silver for golden and silver colour**. Gold is used for embroidery in ornaments and **silver** for embroidery as well as **for painting of dresses windows and pillars of pavilions**.

The figures in the paintings represent the perfect geometrical pattern characterised by **bold lines, vibrant colours, receding foreheads, high noses pointed in unbroken continuation, receding chin, full cheeks, the large bulging lotus petal shaped eyes, short cholis, skirts, scarves and diaphanous draperies**. A distinctive technique is the depiction of jewellery by **thick, raised drops of white colour with particles of green beetle wings used to represent emeralds**. Decorative treatment of the landscape and high horizon are among the prominent characteristics of the Basohli Paintings. The bright sunlight is shown as thin wisps and curls on the horizon; **light rain is depicted by pearl like strands and heavy rain by straight white lines linked with clouds**. Edges of lakes and rivers are also **beautified by a decorative treatment of circular lotus leaves interspersed with the pink buds and flowers**. Basohli Paintings are characterised by the **highly conventionalised representation of trees**. Forests are shown as circles of trees. The trees depicted in Basohli Paintings are also

symbolic. For instance, Love-sick Nayaka is shown under the drooping branches of willows; ripe mangoes are a symbol of the physical charm of women. Basohli Paintings are characterised by the use of evocative stone colours, colours extracted from the leaves of the plants and combination of colours. Basohli Paintings are also characterized by the use of original gold and silver for golden and silver colour, some stone colours and colours from plants are **available in District Kathua, Samba, Udhampur & Jammu, and some stone colours are brought from Rajasthan**. The processing of colours is done by the Basohli Paintings Artisans themselves.

Table 1

Colours Used in Basohli Art and the Materials Used in Creating these Colours

S.No.	COLOURS	MATERIAL
1.	White	Khadiya Clay, Sea-Shells, Zinc oxide
2.	Red	Sangaraf stone, Indian Red Stone, Resin from lac insect, Red Sindoor, Berries of Rhododendron spas.
3.	Orange	Tesu flower (Butea monosperma) orange sindoor, combination of Red & Yellow Colour, Red Lead.
4.	Yellow	Barkihartaal Stone, Mango Leaves, Simbal Tree Leaves (Bombax ceiba) Turmeric Powder, Roots of Berberis, Saffron
5.	Blue	Lapis Lazuli stone, Indigo (Neel)
6.	Green	Green Algae, Malachite Stone
7.	Yellow-Green	Yellow Green Algae
8.	Parrot-Green	Combination of blue & Yellow Colour
9.	Black	Kajal, Lamp Black from earthen Lamps & Karpur Balls.
10.	Brown	Combination of primary colour (Red, Blue & Yellow)
11.	Golden	Original pure Gold Leaf Paper & Combination of brown & Yellow colour
12.	Silver	Pure silver leaf paper, sea-shells & Combination of white, Black & Blue Colour
13.	Bluish-Green	Combination of Green and Yellow colour

Process of Making a Basohli Painting

1.Paper sheet: Basohli Paintings are drawn on handmade sheets prepared by the artisans themselves or on *Sialkoti paper / Wasli paper*. Earlier Basohli Paintings were made on handmade sheets and on Sialkoti paper. Sialkoti paper is handmade thick paper having good power of absorption of colours and is known for durability also. Due to the non-availability of Sialkoti paper, the artisans now made paintings on Wasli paper. Artisans either bring Wasli paper from Jaipur (Rajasthan), or they bring handmade sheets from Rajasthan & prepare Wasli paper themselves. Wasli paper is prepared by pasting layers of 4-8 thin sheets of handmade water absorbent paper that are bound together with the *flour (Maida)*. *Blue vitriol/copper sulphate (Neelathotha)* is also added to the flour, as it prevents paper from being destroyed by many insects. After drawing of these layers Wasli paper was

burnished either with a smooth stone, preferably cornelian (*Aqeeq*), or with a large seashell to make the Wasli paper glossy in appearance.

Picture 2

Different Materials Used for Mixing Colours



2. Colour: The colour of the Basohli Paintings is processed on sea-shells. It gives a natural and traditional feel of processing colour and these colours are processed finely. The colour is then mixed with *kikar Gum/Badam Gum* to increase its fixation properties. The colour is also stored and seashells are used as a colour palette for mixing the colours. This is because the shells prevent mixing of colour and even if the colour dries on the shells, it can be reused by easily adding water, which therefore helps in preventing wastage of colours and ensuring optimum utilisation of colours.

3. Type of Brushes: The brushes for Basohli Paintings are made up of *Squirrels' hairs and Dove feathers*.

Picture 3

Different Brushes used in Basohli Paintings



4. Whitening of Wasli-paper: – *Wasli-paper is Cream coloured*, so before drawing of sketch/ illustrations it is painted with white colour in order to achieve clear white look, followed by drying and burnishing with either smooth stone, preferably *cornelian stone (Aqeeq)*, or with a white large seashell in order to achieve the smooth and glossy look of the paper.

5. Drawing of sketch/ illustrations: -First, a sketch of idioms including decorative items and landscapes as per requirements of the painting are drawn on the *Wasli paper* with the help of brushes/ pencil. If pencil is used, then, the sketch is further outlined with the help of *fine brushes*.

6.Colouring of Elements of Painting: – The sketch/ illustrations are coloured as per the requirement of the painting with the help of fine brushes. *If gold and silver are to be used in painting, then at required places, artisan apply yellow and light white as a base colour for Gold and Silver respectively.* Although there is no such requirement of adding layers of colours in the paintings as the natural colours shows vibrancy in a single coating but if required, all the elements of Basohli Paintings are coloured again and again, followed by drawing and burnishing.

7. Detailing of Painting: – After burnishing, there is a possibility of spreading of colours that affect the outline of the distinctive elements of Basohli Paintings. If so, the elements of paintings are again outlined with the help of fine brushes. After these small decorative features are done in paintings, like *depiction of Jewellery by thick, raised drop of white colour, use of gold and silver on the base colours, exposing bold eyes on the face of the idioms, use of green beetle wings in the jewellery of paintings to represents emeralds, and extra colours are also removed with help of hard brushes.*

8. Bordering of Painting: – The painting is bordered by mainly *using primary colours (red, blue, yellow)* and if required followed by adding layers also.

9. Finishing: – All the elements of the paintings are re-outlined and any deficiency in the painting, if noticed, is fulfilled and corrected.

10. Mounting & Framing: – Painting is finally mounted on a mount sheet followed by framing.

Picture 4

Basohli Art Work by Fine Arts Students in Kathua District



Conclusion

The investigation into the “*Basohli Idiom*” reveals that this school of painting was far more than a localized precursor to later Pahari traditions. it was a **sophisticated apex or acme of artistic and technical innovation**. **By successfully synthesizing a rugged folk vitality with high- classical Sanskrit narratives, the Basohli masters created a visual language that utterly prioritized psychological resonance over representational accuracy**. This current abridged study of Basohli’s school of Art and its technical processes truly confirms that the richness of Basohli art is deep rooted in a unique materiality. The deliberate application of beetle wing fragments and use of highly pigmented and contrasting, mineral – based palette was not just a decorative choice, instead, they functioned as a complex semiotic system where colour served as the primary vehicle for the *Rasa* (the emotional essence). The hot yellows and deep crimson cinnabar reds identified in this research are shown to be essential narrative tools, which are used to evoke the intense devotional and romantic fervor of the *Gita Govinda* and *Rasmanjari*. Also, with acquaintance of use of Wasli paper sheets, whitening them the process of making colours, drawing of illustrations and incorporating intricacies in elements of colour, needless to say, it can be easily concluded that indeed Basohli Art is incomplete without its quintessential elements of making and processing the paper sheets, creating a blend of colours from the lap of nature, Basohli paintings represent a style of contemporary interest, thus Basohli idiom firmly stands as testament to the enduring power of bold, symbolic, and technically rigorous traditional craftsmanship. The current research paper has demonstrated that the Basohli style of painting **exhibits a critical chapter in the Indian Knowledge System too (IKS), where the alchemy of pigment preparation and the geometry of emotional expression is converged**. The present research paper has successfully decoded the intersection of material process and symbolic colour, thus, it can be stated that Basohli Art remains an unparalleled example of how indigenous techniques can elevate narrative art into a transcendental experience. **Basohli paintings, with their rich history, distinctive style, and meticulous craftsmanship, continue to fascinate art connoisseurs and historians, standing as a testament to the cultural and artistic legacy of Basohli and the broader Pahari region.**

Picture 5

Art Work of Connoisseurs, Art Enthusiasts and local artists who are incessantly contributing in Basohli Art and Promoting Dogra Culture of people of Jammu and Kashmir



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