

Musavvari: A personal take

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As a paper and book conservator, I am very interested in the materials and techniques used to make objects. I am also fascinated by the craftsmanship of artisans, their production practices and their creative processes. I have been studying and working with Islamic and Indian works on paper for many years, and I am particularly drawn to Pahari paintings, which are beautifully represented in the Rietberg Museum's collections. I have observed and admired many examples, trying to understand the divine essence that emanates from them, and this course has opened my eyes not only to the technical aspects but also to the intentions of the masters who created them. Unfortunately, due to personal and professional constraints, I have very little time and opportunity to devote to artistic pursuits or manual training. That's why this immersive course was a unique opportunity for me to devote nine full days to Indian painting. I have taken a few short courses on Indian miniature painting in the past, either on general techniques or specific themes, but none of them were as in-depth, serious and professional as the GBF summer course.

Most of my knowledge comes from academic reading, theoretical studies, and careful physical observation of paintings, drawings, and manuscripts. However, in the field of conservation, there is a constant principle that theoretical knowledge must be combined with manual practices such as copying ancient models and nature. The recent interest in the discipline of technical art history also highlights the need to reconnect theory and practice, for example by reproducing ancient recipes, in order to better understand the materiality and function of the objects preserved in our collections. For example, I have read in modern essays about the use of *khariya* (calcite white) and its recipe, but I never fully understood the addition of soapberry shells to obtain the white pigment used as a primer. Manish's demonstration was an eye-opener for me. I was also very interested in his method of preparing gold paint, which was very new to me and which I will experiment with when I return home. I was also

delighted to learn about the process of making lac from sticklac, a process I had never seen before.



Manish makes Kherriya by whisking the chalky earth with soap berry shells



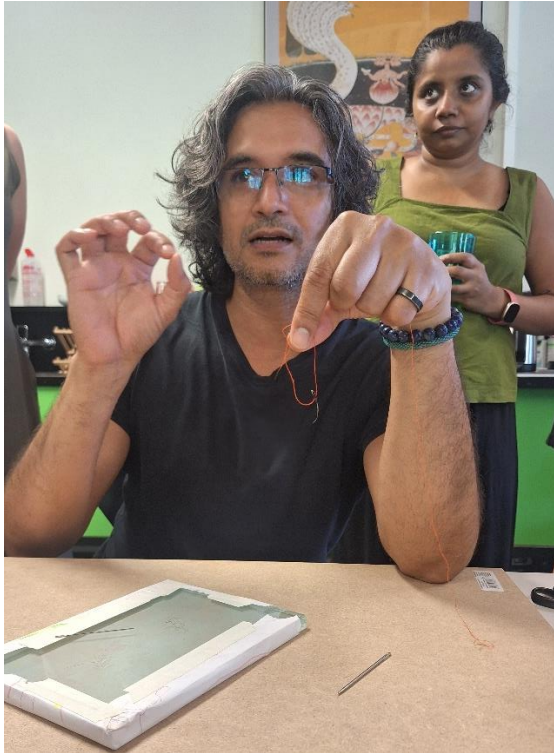
*Soapberry (*Sapindus mukorossi*)*



Manish produces gold paint with gold leaves, babul tree gum and water.



I also really liked the session dedicated on bursh-making, the bristles of the brushes being made with the hair of a squirrel tail.



Murad demonstrates how to make a squirrel-hair brush



The five brushes were used during the course

As Johannes Beltz pointed out during the certificate ceremony, the uniqueness of this course also lies in the meeting of two ustads from either side of the border. This exclusive encounter echoes the precept of the Mughal *kharkhana*, where artists of different religious denominations worked and collaborated side by side. I found it fascinating to understand how Manish and Murad perpetuate and reappropriate the mussavari tradition with their own style, reflecting on their own journeys, heritage and personal histories. In this regard, the screening of their respective films (*Portrait of a cloud; Musavari: Colors of Tradition*) and the discussion that followed were inspiring moments in the course. During the visit to the storage, Manish and Murad had the opportunity to explain the creative reasoning behind the paintings they made for the *Ragamala: Pictures for All Senses* exhibition.



Discussion around Manish's painting



Viewing in the storage

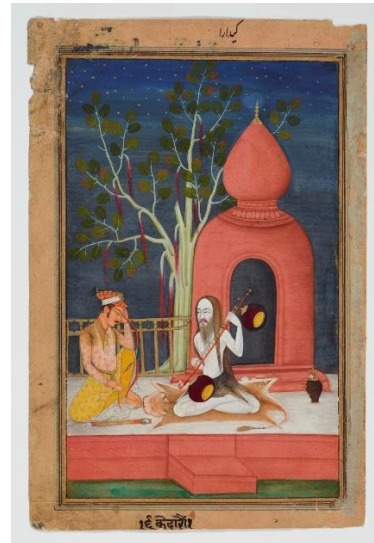
From a technical point of view, the different stages involved in creating a painting were explained to us very clearly, and even though I have no ambition to become a painter myself, I now have the tools I need to create another painting on my own, simply for the pleasure of doing so. As the participants repeatedly pointed out, the process of painting is a soothing and meditative act for the mind and hand, helping you to reconnect with your inner self!

The casting for the course was particularly successful in that the participants naturally maintained a warm and friendly atmosphere, rich in exchanges, humour and encouragement, all fuelled by Sonika's fantastic enthusiasm and kindness. For me, this atmosphere was reflected in the quality of the work we were able to produce and present at the end of the workshop.

For my project, I decided to combine the banyan tree painted in the *ragamala* painting of the Bikaner school (right image) and Krishna depicted in the magnificent series created in Basohli in the 17th century (left image).



*Krishna Dancing Before the Cowgirls as they
Clap their Hands,
Basolhi, c.1730-1735*

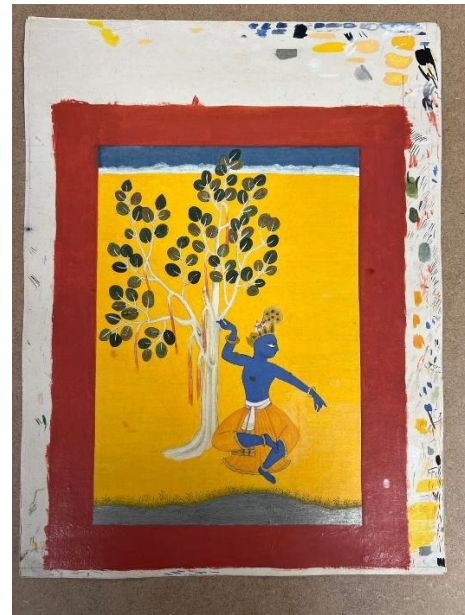


*Kedara Ragini Folio 16, Bikaner, 17th
century*

I really enjoyed painting this tree, which combines two techniques: flat colours for the leaves and fine brushstrokes for the trunk rendering. I chose to colour the entire background in bright yellow with a synthetic pigment that imitates traditional Indian yellow made from cow urine, because for me, this colour is the very essence of Indian miniatures. I particularly enjoyed painting Krishna, who is reminiscent of Basolhi models with his bright colours, his pose and the use of beetle wings to represent jewellery. The water was painted with tin-based paint recreated by Manish to imitate traditional silver paint. Unlike silver, which tarnishes and blackens over time, tin-based paint remains stable and intact. After application and drying, the tin paint is carefully polished with an agate stone to achieve its shiny effect.



My painting after applying colours in the sky, the water and the ground



My painting at the end of the course

I would like to deeply thank the GBF Foundation, Sonika Soni, and Johannes Beltz for giving me the opportunity to participate in this unforgettable experience. I am indebted to Manish Soni and Murad Khan Mumtaz for their teaching, their countless explanations, their generosity in sharing their knowledge and their personal experience as modern artists using ancestral techniques in our contemporary world. I would like to extend my warmest thanks to Vera Fischer for taking such good care of us and for the snacks she provided during the coffee break. I would also like to thank all the staff at the Rietberg Museum for welcoming us so warmly, the café staff, and the chef for his delicious lunches.