

Mussavari : A personal take

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During ten hot, summery days in August 2025, a very international and multi-background group of twelve eager students attended the summer school called *Musavvari: An Intensive Workshop on Traditional South Asian Painting Techniques*. The workshop was taught by Manish Soni, an artist master from Bhilwara, Rajasthan, India, and Murad Khan Mumtaz, a scholar and artist from Lahore, Pakistan and Williamstown, Massachusetts, USA.

Our skilful teachers took us on an in-depth journey through the materials and techniques of South Asian paintings, combining demonstrations and art-historical lessons with plenty of hands-on practice as we all created our very own painting during the summer school.

Getting started with lines

Firstly, we were given a squirrel-hair brush, which is traditionally used for all the fine lines and details in paintings. We immediately started practising drawing parallel lines going into different directions, as well as spirals and long lines, to get used to our new tool. We continued these small exercises every morning for half an hour as part of our *riyaz*, our practising sessions. During the course, we did not only work with the brush, but we were also even demonstrated how brushes are made from a bunch of squirrel tail hairs, a pigeon feather quill, a bamboo chopstick, and some yarn as well as *gum-arabic*. To watch this demonstration was very impressive, and we all watched with undivided attention.

Preparing the colours and the *vasli*



Initial drawing of the composition

Besides we started manufacturing the paints, beginning with carbon black. This was collected in an unglazed terracotta bowl above a flame burning mustard oil, and

later mixed with *gum-arabic* as binder, as were all the colours (except *Lakh*). Little by little, Manish and Murad showed us the preparation of all the twelve traditional colours. In our case, some were substituted with non-toxic, already purified pigments. For example, manufacturing the *lajward* pigment (Ultramarine) out from lapis lazuli stones takes weeks of preparation and purification to reach a degree of fineness suitable for the paintings.

With our own paintings we started directly on a already prepared *vasli*, primed with a layer of white *khadia* (chalk white) to save time for all the other work steps. Nevertheless, we were still given a demonstration of how *vasli* is formed from multiple layers of *varak* (single sheets of hemp paper) and glued together with a starch paste called *lai* made from refined wheat flour.

Getting started with our paintings



Pigment preparations for our compositions

With the composition of our own paintings we were, as with all the other steps, always well supported by Murad, Manish and Sonika Soni, researcher, guest curator, and artist herself while Vera Fischer, one of the art educators at Rietberg Museum, tended to our wellbeing. As in tradition, we copied motifs from historical paintings in the Rietberg collection. After applying another layer of *khadia* and leaving our *vaslis* to dry over night, we started tracing our motifs onto them. We then needed to follow the traced lines with our squirrel-hair brushes. Finally, our daily brush practise came in very useful. Once all the lines were drawn, a sweat-inducing session of paper polishing started. With a lot of pressure and patience we polished our *vasli* from the verso to create a smooth, shiny surface to paint on. During every step, we found it interesting to learn about Manish's and Murad's slightly different workshop practices. Manish, for example, uses a very smooth agate for polishing, whereas Murad mainly uses a *kauri* shells.

One highlight after the other



Looking at the originals from the Museum Rietberg collection

Between the drawing sessions and demonstrations, we also had the chance to see some of the precious original paintings in the collection. First, we got to see the stunning artworks, created by Murad and Manish, for the *Ragamala: Pictures for All Senses* exhibition, which took place in 2024-25. We received a lot of first-hand information by the artists and by Sonika, curator of the exhibition. Furthermore, we were presented with the paintings that we used as templates for our own work, as well as other highlights from the museum's collection. As curator of Rietberg's Indian paintings collection, Caroline Widmer was able to share many interesting facts about the collection and specific artworks during this meeting with the originals.

Final words

Personally, this summer school has been a true gift. I never expected to receive such detailed information, or to have the opportunity to learn so many details and through practice, as I did in this workshop.

The exchange between the teachers, the museum staff and the participants with all their diverse backgrounds, was very enriching, and we all benefited from each other's knowledge and perspectives. So, our shared lunches and coffee breaks were always filled with interesting discussions in the beautiful museum park. As the course is still ongoing, our curiosity remains and will surely remain long after these wonderful days of our Musavvari Summer School.