



Part Three
Yoga in the Indian Imagination
16th–19th Century



Transcendence and Desire in *Ragamala* Paintings

18A

Kedar Ragini

From the *Chunar Ragamala*
India, Uttar Pradesh, Chunar, 1591
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 22.5 × 15 cm
Freer Gallery of Art, Michael Goedhuis Ltd., F1985.2¹

18B

Bhairava Raga

From the *Chunar Ragamala*
India, Uttar Pradesh, Chunar, 1591
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 25.5 × 15.7 cm
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, IS.40-1981²

18C

Megha Malar Ragini

India, Rajasthan, Bundi, ca. 1600
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 30.2 × 24 cm
Museum für Asiatische Kunst, MIK I 5698

18D

Sarang Raga

From the *Sirohi Ragamala*
India, Rajasthan, Sirohi, ca. 1680–90
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 23.2 × 17.8 cm
Freer Gallery of Art, Purchase, F1992.18

18E

Kedar Ragini

Ruknuddin (active ca. 1650–97)
India, Rajasthan, Bikaner, ca. 1690–95
Opaque watercolor, gold, and ink on paper;
14.9 × 11.9 (image), 25.6 × 18.7 cm (page)
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr.
and Mrs. Peter Findlay, 1978, 1978.540.2

18F

A Yogini in Meditation

From the *Impey Ragamala*
India, Bengal, ca. 1760
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper;
35.1 × 24.3 cm (folio with borders),
22 × 14.3 cm (painting without borders)
The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library,
Dublin, In 65.2³

18G

Bhupati Ragini

From the *Impey Ragamala*
India, Bengal, ca. 1760
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper;
35.2 × 26.3 cm (folio with borders),
23.3 × 16.1 cm (painting without borders)
The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library,
Dublin, In 65.4⁴

18H

Saindhavi Ragini, wife of Bhairon

From the *Impey Ragamala*
India, Bengal, ca. 1760–73
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper;
34.9 × 25.9 cm (folio with borders),
23.2 × 15.8 cm (painting without borders)
The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library,
Dublin, In 65.7⁵

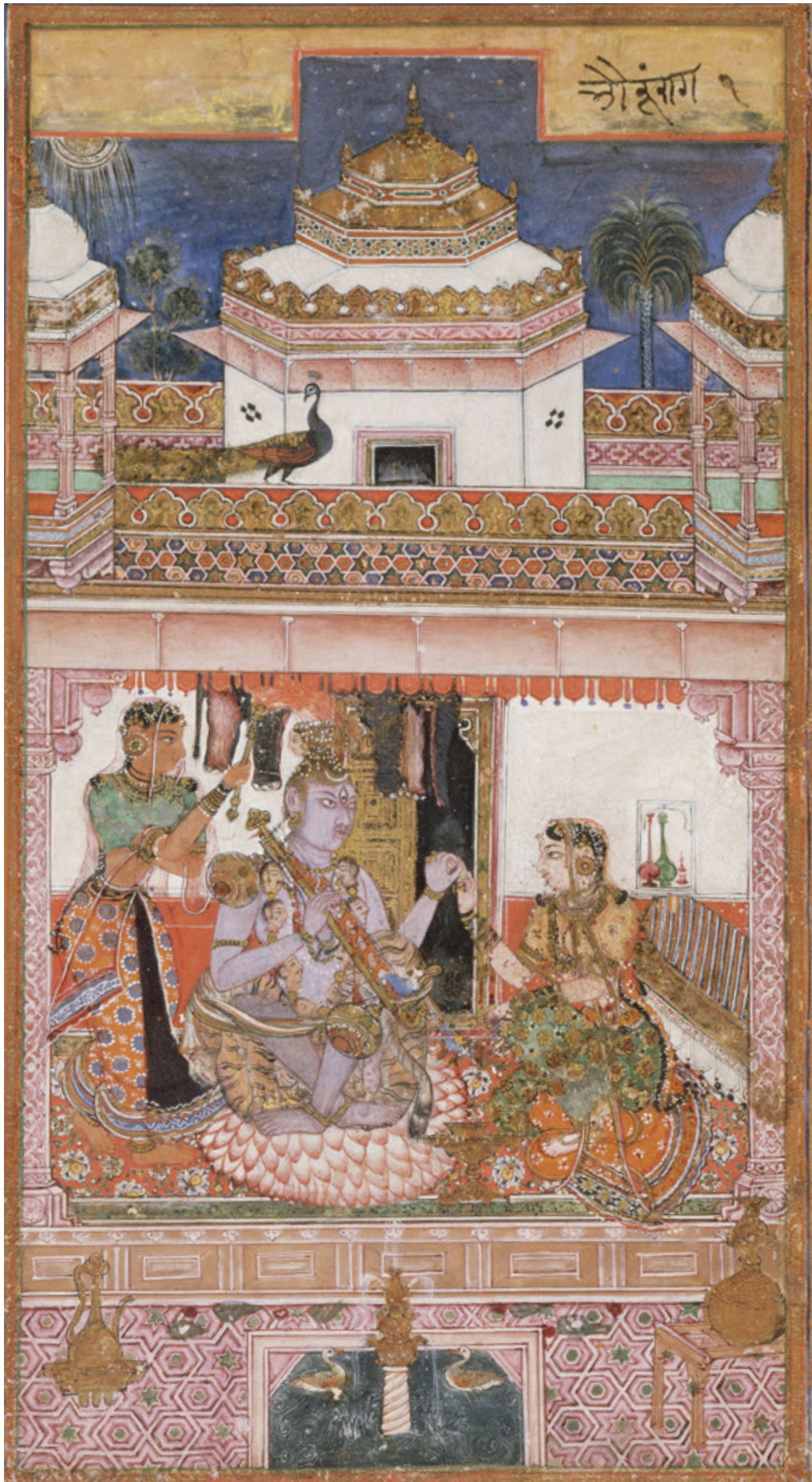
18I

Gaur Malhara Ragini

India, Rajasthan, Kotah, 18th century
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 14 × 18.3 cm
Museum für Asiatische Kunst, MIK I 5523

Yogis were a cherished theme of painting, in which they were an intriguing foil to the art's materialism. In illustrated *ragamala* paintings, each of which depicts a scene associated with a musical mode, images of holy men infuse music and painting, love and pleasure with divinity, lifting aesthetic delectation into a more serious register. With its strange contrasts, *Bhairava Raga* perfectly exemplifies the frisson that the aesthetic and the ascetic can arouse together (cat. 18b). The Hindu god Shiva, smeared in ash, sits with a *yogapatta* clasped around his bent legs, *vina* in hand, a garland of severed heads around his neck. He is the ascetic god, king of the cremation grounds, of abstinence and renunciants. Yet as he reaches a hand out to clasp the fingers of the woman before him, he apparently succumbs to her amorous enticements and her world of sinuously necked wine bottles, richly patterned textiles, cooling fountains, and restless peacocks, one of whom struts on the roof above, searching for his mate. Or does Shiva draw her to himself and his world of death and extremes? At the heart of the painting, Shiva and his music tease mortals with a seemingly impossible collaboration between material desire and its transcendence that wells up again and again in India's *raga* and *ragini* paintings.

Ragamala paintings illustrate poetic verses associated with musical modes. Traditionally in India, musicians do not perform written compositions. Instead, a musician's every performance is a unique improvisation on a "framework" of musical patterns called a *raga* or *ragini*. A *raga* or *ragini* is defined by the mood it conveys as well as by a wide variety of musical specifications that include the notes assigned to it, which notes are dominant, whether certain notes are sharp or flat, how its notes rise and fall, and characteristic melodic motifs. By the fourteenth century, *ragas* and *raginis* were being organized into families. A common system recognized six *raga* husbands, each





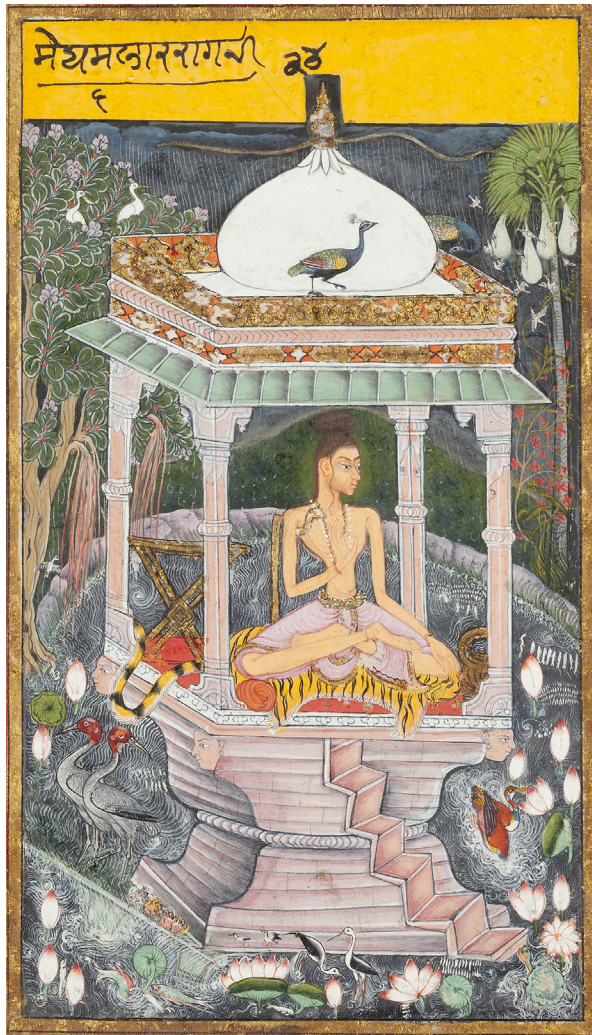
18e Kedar Ragini

18a Kedar Ragini;
opposite.





18d Sarang Raga



18c *Megha Malar Ragini*

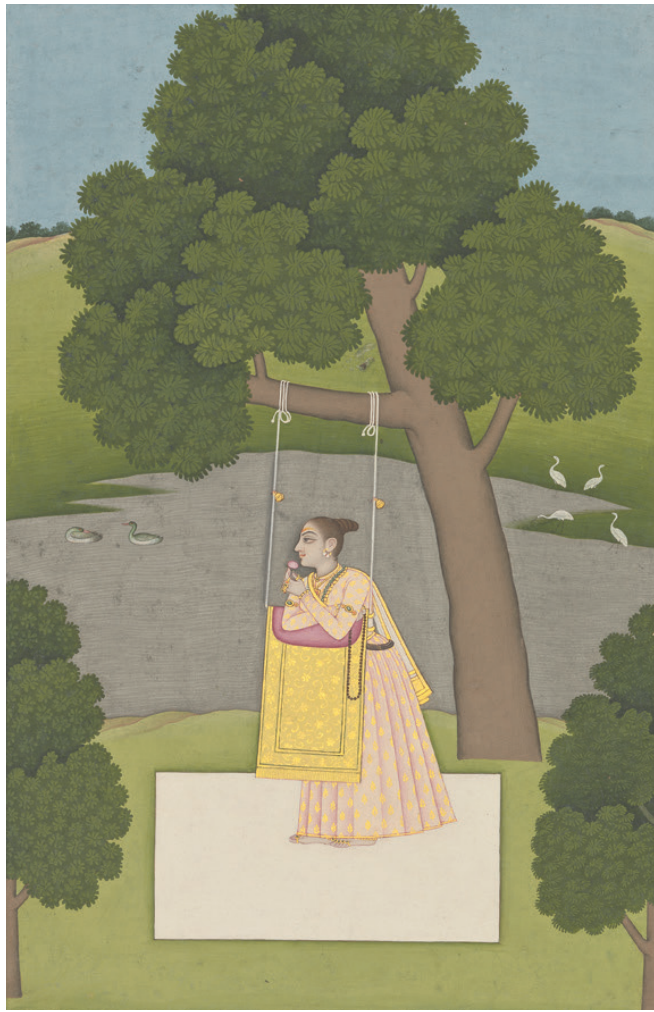


18i *Gaur Malhara Ragini*

“married” to five *ragini* wives for a total of thirty-six *ragas* and *raginis*. Families of musical modes sometimes included sons or *ragaputras* as well. A complete set of *ragas* and *raginis* was called a *ragamala* (or garland of *ragas*). Each *raga*, *ragini*, or *ragaputra* was associated with a verse or verses describing it as a hero, heroine, ascetic, or deity, and with an image that depicted it. The compositions and iconographies of *ragamala* images quickly became fairly fixed and easily recognizable. The composition of *Bhairava Raga* with his beloved in cat. 18b, for example, appeared repeatedly in subsequent illustrations. Nevertheless, all elements of the *ragamala* were subject to change and many variations exist.⁶

Music was an intrinsic feature of religious devotion in India, as is clear from the yogis and yoginis who play or listen to music there. *Bhakti*—the intense personal devotion to God, which requires no intermediaries and takes the form of powerful human emotions, particularly of erotic love—is often expressed musically. (Saints like Mira Bai, for example, are typically pictured with an instrument in hand, singing their verses of loving praise to God. In addition, the god Krishna was often the hero of *ragamala* verses and pictures, where he was portrayed with a beloved or playing his flute and dancing with his devotees, flavoring the music with divine ecstasy.)

The theme of erotic love frequently intersected with the theme of transcendence in *ragamala* illustrations featuring yogis and yoginis. *Megha Malar Ragini* is described in some *ragamala* texts as the god of love and in others as an ascetic. Cat. 18c recapitulates the curious collision of longing and renunciation that is so intriguing in *Bhairava Raga* (cat. 18b). A buzzing surge of verdant fecundity, sparked by lightning and fed by a torrid rain, drives the weaver birds to mate, the lotuses to swell and bloom, and the fishes to agitate; even the pavilion seems to twist anxiously and the artist’s line to ache for resolution. It is desire that drives the lone ascetic to austerities in this image: separation from the beloved



18f A Yogini in Meditation

is a kind of penance that promises redemption. Saindhavi Ragini (cat. 18h), in a common *ragamala* verse, longs for her lover as well and is maddened by his absence; the verses imply that it is the god Shiva she adores. Though graced by the delicate beauty of a princess, she wears the garb of a yogini; she rests her arm on a stand to support her as she fingers her *mala* (rosary) in prayer and listens attentively to an old sage's music, no doubt hoping to find peace in a spiritual oneness with the god who has deserted her.

Meanwhile, in cat. 18g, Bhupali Ragini's longing in separation makes her a model for the young prince and the sage who listen to her song: "Bhupali, belonging to the quiescent mood,

a woman in the splendor of beauty, lovely, with a face like the moon, a full bosom, her body anointed with saffron, pained by the separation, remembers her beloved."⁷ Quiescence is implied by the balance of elements symmetrically arrayed on either side of the heroine and by the gentle grays of the starry night. A crescent moon, as if extracted from the gleaming white of her dress, recalls the verses associated with this *ragini*. In another poet's words, it is "as if she were the moon, carved and flaked."⁸ The crescent also recalls Shiva, for whom it is emblematic, implying that the yogini's anguished separation is also a devotional longing for God.

Yet, other images of saints take us beyond the agonies of desire. *Kedar*



18g Bhupali Ragini

Ragini (cats. 18a, 18e) is one of the most peaceful of the musical modes. Typically it is accompanied by a scene of a sage singing to the music of a *vina* before a prince or another holy man. Night has fallen, the moon shines in a deep blue night sky, and the auditor's eyes grow heavy or close. "In penance, adorned, gray [with ashes], dark, a young man beauteous in every limb, [this is] Kedar."⁹ *Kedar* comes last in most *ragamala* series, and its somber colors, spare ornament, and mood of release from attachment and struggle bring the musical cycle to a fitting close, as if one were being invited to slide from music into a dreamless beyond.

In the late sixteenth century, numerous illustrated *ragamalas* were made

18h Saindhavi
Ragini, wife of
Bhairon



in the Deccan and at the courts of the Hindu rulers called Rajputs, who ruled in Central India, Rajasthan, and the Pahari Hills. The Mughals also took an interest in the subject. Abu'l Fazl, the minister and chronicler of Mughal Emperor Akbar (reigned 1556–1605), noted that *ragas* and *raginis* were supposed to originate with the Hindu god “Mahadeva [Shiva] and [his wife] Parvati”: Shiva is, of course, the quintessential ascetic.¹⁰ Although neither Akbar nor his successor Jahangir (reigned 1605–27), both of whom appreciated this music, is known to have commissioned illustrated *ragamalas*, the commander of Akbar’s armies, ‘Abd al-Rahim, had a set of *ragamala* paintings made from compositions he seems to have acquired from the rulers of Bikaner.¹¹ Persian inscriptions on the British Museum’s roughly contemporaneous *Manley Ragamala* suggest it too was owned by a Muslim connoisseur, so that these paintings emerged in an atmosphere of Muslim and Hindu social concord and exchange.¹²

What would the Hindu imagery of the *ragamala* have meant to Mughal viewers? Mughal gentlemen took a keen interest in Sufi ideas, and many Sufis, in turn, studied Hinduism. In Indian Sufism, the stories of Krishna and Radha were plumbed for hidden spiritual meanings.¹³ The Hindu woman who longs for her beloved, whether he be a man or god, could be viewed as the embodiment of the lower or sensual self or, alternatively, as a model of the soul passionately yearning for God. Thus the yogini of the *ragamala*, who physically wastes away as she concentrates her mind on her lord, could be viewed from a Sufi point of view as a model of devotion. Meanwhile, the Sufis took a keen interest in the yogic practices of India’s holy men, particularly their techniques of meditation and breath control. Though Sufi and yogic aims differed, the Sufis respected yogic techniques as potentially powerful means for attaining a state of blissful union with

God.¹⁴ It is not surprising, therefore, to find that ‘Abd al-Rahim had his *ragamala* paintings interspersed with Sufi verses, among other texts and images, in what has come to be known as his *Laud Ragamala Album*. By the mid- to late seventeenth century, the Mughals were also understanding *ragamalas* to have health benefits and began to commission their own illustrated renditions more frequently.¹⁵ No doubt the *Kedar Ragini*, for example, was understood to bring calm to the fiery heat of the warrior’s disposition. Even today, one encounters in India the idea that *ragas* and *raginis* can rebalance the body and spirits.

The iconography of the *ragamala* should be taken to have been somewhat open ended. The lover can be a mortal or a god. The beloved is a girl filled with a sexual longing that could also be spiritual. In the Mughal *mehfil* (assembly)—where Hindus and Muslims sat side by side to enjoy dance, music, wine, poetic verses, and paintings—no doubt debates transpired about the modes of achieving divine transcendence. The yogis and yoginis of *ragamala* paintings would have been exotic to all. They belonged to a world beyond the social pale, of men and women who had left home and family to engage in extreme practices, acquire mysterious powers, and come to a closeness with God that no gentleman could hope to obtain. In a musical context, they conveyed *bhavas* or emotions not encountered in daily life, tantalizing with the possibility of a different path and a taste of the beyond. However, *ragamala* paintings show that that taste started in the world, with the visible, audible, touchable, tasteable, and scentable, as is so eloquently expressed by the young yogini in cat. 18f who rests against a swing, having vowed to remain standing, smelling a small, pink rose in the iconic gesture of the refined connoisseur. MEA