

Review

Garland of Visions: Color, Tantra, and a Material History of Indian Painting, by Jinah Kim. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021. xv + 331 pp. \$75 (hb). ISBN 978-0-520343-21-4.

Reviewed by: Archishman Sarker, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India.
arc.sublime@gmail.com

Keywords: Indian painting; South Asian art; South Asia; tantra; Vajrayāna Buddhism; trans-Himalaya; Nepal; Tibet; miniature painting; illuminated manuscripts; Buddhism; Brahmanism; colour.

This is the author's second book on medieval Indian and South Asian painting traditions and follows the publication of *Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia* in 2013, which was critically acclaimed widely; but also invited excruciating reviews from staunch historians and Indologists for offering 'a modernist perspective, unfettered by any [historical] method, on an unusually rewarding, but also very challenging, subject' (Hinüber 2016). The time period covered in the present book ranges between 1000 and 1500 CE—as the author terms it, 'within a "medieval" time frame in global reckoning'—and geographically it covers a large area 'connecting Silk Road sites like Khotan and Dunhuang with centers of manuscript production in the South Asian subcontinent' (p. 4).

Opening with an example of an illustrated folio from a Buddhist manuscript of *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra* from twelfth-century eastern India, made during the twelfth regnal year of the Pāla ruler Gopāla IV, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (acc. no. 1987-52-14), the author narrates a brief *spiegazione* on the complexity of colour execution, minutiae and design found in the form of a band around the string-holes of these manuscripts (which include several motifs)¹ and reflects on the manuscript's migratory history: that of being commissioned by a lay woman named Anaghākā in eastern India in the medieval period before it travelled to the Nepal valley in Bhaktapur to be owned by a certain Nepalese patrician Śrī Amṛtadeva, who had the fact

1. The subject of motifs in eastern Indian manuscripts has not been adequately studied, with most studies focusing on iconography of particular deities rather than elements of design and minute motifs as seen in these marginal illustrative bands as well as punctuating the text itself at times.

recorded below the original colophon. With such appropriate examples of the migratory ('transregional' and 'transtemporal') and fragmented existence of these manuscripts, and building upon certain qualitative aspects of subcontinental manuscript and miniature painting traditions, the book tries to present a 'theory-of-everything' of medieval South Asian painting, employing historically nuanced methods of study as well as objective formalism to create a narrative that accommodates and reflects on the connectedness of the Himalayan and trans-Himalayan regions with the rest of South Asia, challenging the oft-held perception of regions like Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, parts of Tibet and the Bengal and Assam Dooars² as being historically 'cut off' from the rest of the world—a perception that is commonly painted by colonial and even post-colonial scholarship, although "Tibetan tantric and Mahāyāna Buddhist lineages "occupied the same terrain" as "the Sufi, Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva lineages of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries" (p. 5). This supra-syncretic spiritual backdrop to the religious landscape of the Indian subcontinent in the medieval period, encapsulated in the spirit of *tantra* (literally, to 'expand/broaden the experience of life and living' from an organically *centred* perspective), forms the grain of South Asian artistic production and consumption in the period concerned—a fact with an acute awareness of which, the author proceeds in her investigation.

The book is divided into three sections, based on its three main intentions—the medium of illustrated manuscripts and its suitability as a vehicle for the complex process of transference of style and aesthetics, the composition of 'esoteric visual knowledge', and the last section on colour which brings forward new observations made by the author on colour as a distinctive element of visual communication in medieval South Asian painting. Being primarily focused on creating a historical trajectory of these paintings from an 'emic' perspective, the author traces the developments in *tantra* in the subcontinent through the medieval period, including cultic icons in both Brahmanism and Vajrayāna Buddhism, as a philosophical undertone to artistic production.

The section titled 'A Garland of Visions' is a further expansion on the author's idea of 'mālā as an Indic model for painted manuscripts' (p. 127) that stems from her research on Buddhist *maṇḍalas* as well as Buddhist revolving

2. The English colloquialism 'Dooars' or 'Duars' originated around the eighteenth century to denote the alluvial floodplains just south of the foothills of the Himalayas in the *terai* region of the northeastern Himalayas stretching across modern northern West Bengal and Assam. The term 'Dooars' or 'Duars' was officially assigned to the region following the Anglo-Bhutan War or *Duār* War of 1864–65, and the eighteen *duārs* were divided between the 'Bengal Duars' and the 'Assam Duars' by the British colonial administrators. This region, owing to its geography, played a significant role in the trans-Himalayan and trans-subcontinental exchange of Indic, Himalayan and Central Asian cultures—a fact seldom acknowledged in extant scholarship.

bookcases and prayer-wheels. Whether *mālā* is the most appropriate word in this scenario can be debated, the idea that these manuscripts symbolically and metaphorically served at various semantic levels to denote a continuity—that originates basically from the circular notion of time prevalent in Vajrayāna and Tibetan Buddhism—is comprehensible. But Kim's presage cannot, of course, be held as a model that can be applied to the whole field of Indian painting—a substantial majority of which are murals. The author's comparative studies of the manuscripts with murals from the western Deccan at Ajanta and Ellora are insightful in terms of iconography but do not offer a well-built bridge to the study of traditions of Indian miniature painting. Indeed, it would have been more beneficial to the method employed, if instead of studying the similarities through specific and pin-pointed instances in iconography, the subtle influences in figural and non-figural composition could be observed through close study combined with formal analysis, and interpreted.

While the last section is primarily a study of colour and colour-arrangement in terms of composition, stemming from a quest to understand the reasons behind the dominance of primary colours in the South Asian miniature artist's palette, the author refers to the *Citrasūtra* to interpret the arrangement of primary and tonal colours in Indian miniature painting. For examining visual communication in the holistic sense, the author does not however delve into the concept of *parokṣa*, also from the *Citrasūtra*, literally meaning 'beyond-the-eye', although it became an important idea and practice in tantric visual perception as well as in Madhyamaka metaphysics in medieval eastern Indian Buddhism. The author's reflections on the colour of the deity Kṛṣṇa take into account the broad spectrum of the usage of the colour blue or 'blue-black' in Indian painting—'In the Esoteric Buddhist sādhanās, *nīla* and *kṛṣṇa* are often used interchangeably to denote Akṣobhya's lineage ... colour descriptors for ... forms of Saṃvara and Hevajra in Abhayākara Gupta's *Niṣpannayogāvalī* is always *kṛṣṇa*' (p. 205).

While Jeremiah P. Losty's works on Indian miniature paintings and Gregory Schopen's works on medieval trans-Himalayan Buddhism still remain a standard in the subject, this publication brings together a number of examples of medieval Indian paintings from varied sources in order to string them together on some basic characteristics of medieval Indian painting, a search whose intentions do not deviate much from scholarship on the subject in most parts of the twentieth century; thus, pace Kim, the book envisions but cannot offer a comprehensive understanding on the subject through a 'unifying theory'—that can only be counterfactually or apocryphally construed. There exist huge gaps in scholarship on the manuscripts from eastern India in particular and on Indian painting in general, with only the *Citrasūtra* existing as a reference in this void, which is why new research on the subject needs to be meticulous, closely investigative and wary of broad generalizations. The book contributes new knowledge nonetheless on the 'material

history' of Indian paintings, including the nature of the pigments used and studying the original colour schemata of the compositions through scientific analysis, alongside propounding a brief structural outline, throughout the last section, for a taxonomy of colour in medieval Indian painting. The scope for the study of this subject in the twenty-first century is incredible, potentially providing new insight not only on the study of Indian miniature painting itself but also on the nature of trade and consumption of pigments in medieval South Asia.

REFERENCE

- Hinüber, O. von 2016. Review of *Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia* [South Asia Across the Disciplines] by Jinah Kim. *Indo-Iranian Journal* 59(4): 371–82.