



Portraits of Devotion

Popular *Manorath* Paintings from Nathdwara
in the Collection of Anil Relia

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FIGURE 1A.
The Haveli Temple.
 A traditional representation of the Nathdwara temple.
 Opaque watercolour and gold on paper; c. 1900.
 20.5 x 25.5 in (52.1 x 64.8 cm).

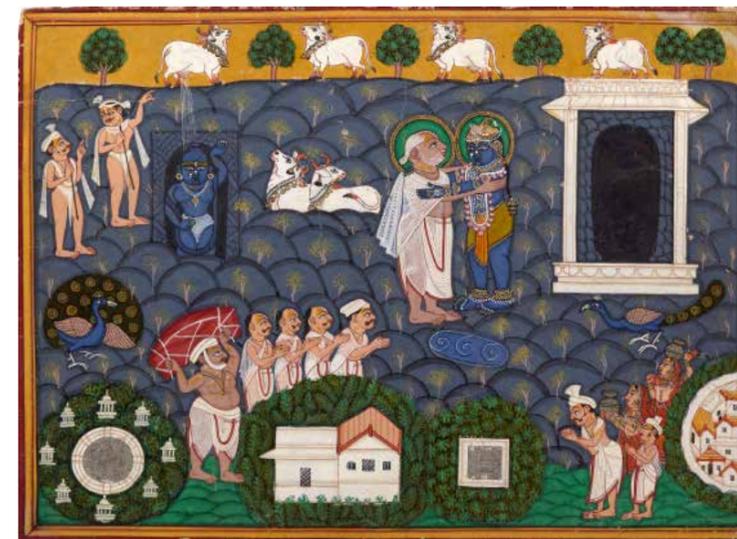


FIGURE 1B.
Pratham Milan.
 The first encounter of Vallabhacharya with Shrinathji at Mount Govardhan.
 Opaque watercolour and gold on paper; c. 1840.
 7.1 x 10 in. (18 x 25.4 cm).

Nathdwara: an introduction

Shrinathji is the most important svarup, or self-manifested icon, of the Pushti Marg community.⁴ This black marble statue, representing Krishna as a child, resides in the *haveli* temple of Nathdwara, a palatial mansion built in 1672. From the time of the temple's construction, the pilgrimage town of Nathdwara became the most important cultural centre of the Pushti Marg community (Fig. 1a).

Pushti Marg traces its origins to Mount Govardhan, in the region of Braj, where, in 1493, the icon of Shrinathji miraculously manifested itself to Vallabhacharya (1479–1531), the preceptor of the sect. Fig. 1b depicts the moment of the foundation of Pushti Marg—the first encounter and embrace between the philosopher Vallabhacharya and Shrinathji on Mount Govardhan.

The black marble sculpture of Shrinathji is known to have resided in the region of Braj until 1669, when it was removed by its caretakers during a period of political instability in the region. After two years of peregrinations in Rajasthan, the icon found its new abode in the town of Nathdwara.⁵

The foundation of the *haveli* temple in 1672 became the catalyst shaping the future of Nathdwara and of the Pushti Marg community in the region. Devotional activities in the town were not limited to complex liturgical celebrations; they also included the production and patronage of music,

4. For a definition of *svrup*, see the Glossary.

5. For more information on the sect of Pushti Marg, see Barz. For the manifestation of the Shrinathji icon on Mount Govardhan, see Vaudeville. For the reasons for Shrinathji's exile from Braj, see Pauwels and Bachrach.



FIGURE 3.
Festival of the Five Svarups.
 By Ghasiram Hardev Sharma;
 opaque watercolour and gold on paper;
 c. 1908.
 21.1 x 15.9 in. (53.6 x 40.5 cm).

corresponds to a reinvigoration of the arts at the hands of an influential priest, Tilkayat Govardhanlal, who was the head of the Shrinathji temple from 1876 until his death in 1934. This local revitalization corresponds, in turn, to other movements of cultural and artistic revival across the subcontinent in the late colonial period.

Nathdwara painting at the time of Govardhanlal

The flourishing of the arts at the time of Govardhanlal (1862–1934) came on the heels of an unfortunate period in the history of Pushti Marg, in which the sect suffered a substantial loss of credibility. This decline began with the notorious Libel Case of 1862, in which the head priest of the Shri Balkrishnaji Temple of Surat, a temple in the network of Pushti Marg, was convicted of sexual misconduct.¹¹ This disturbing event was followed, in 1876, by the exile from Nathdwara for insubordination of the *tilkayat* of the Shrinathji temple, Girdharji (also spelled Giridhar, 1843–1903), who was accused of extorting money from pilgrims to support his luxurious lifestyle. His conduct violated the sect's precepts, which oblige Pushti Marg priests to dedicate themselves fully to devotional service, or *seva*. For his improper behavior, Girdharji was exiled in the region of Braj on May 21, 1876. Despite his numerous petitions to the Mewar Government, he never succeeded in attaining reinstatement. Instead, his son Govardhanlal, then a minor, was appointed *tilkayat* of the *haveli* temple.¹²

The appointment of Govardhanlal in 1876 coincided with the revocation of the 1809 edict in which the State of Mewar had accorded the *tilkayats* of Nathdwara full control over their judicial, administrative, and economic affairs. From 1876 on, these matters fell under the control of the State of Mewar, leaving Govardhanlal full authority over the religious functions of the temple. This important change in administration allowed the priest a considerable amount of time to look after the well-being of the community. This new emphasis was obviously accompanied by a significant amount of pressure to restore the credibility lost by Pushti Marg in the wake of the exile of his father.

Govardhanlal promoted new projects to relaunch Nathdwara as a devotional centre. He built a Sanskrit school, a public library, and hospitals, and he put a great deal

11. For the Libel Case of 1862, see Mulji 170–182, Appendix.

12. For the misbehavior of Girdharji, see Jindel 23–24, 197–199; and Saha.



FIGURE 9.
Portrait of Two Devotees.
Detail of Cat. no. 10.

Figure 10.
Portrait of a Devotee.
Detail of Cat. no. 6.

FIGURE 11.
Unfinished Portrait of Govardhanlal.
Cut-and-pasted gelatin silver print and ink
on paper; c. 1920.
19.5 x 25 in. (49.5 x 63.5 cm).
Courtesy of Aditya Ruia.

which impact their final optical results. In the two *manoraths* above (Cat. nos. 6, 10), the black-and-white cut-out prints served as aids to reproduce accurate likenesses of the devotees and to achieve the desired photo-realistic style, which had already been popularized by earlier miniature paintings (e.g., Fig. 7b). The fact that the artists concealed the textural differences of the two media by covering the edges of the print and by painting on top of the photograph makes such works dissimilar from collages in which heterogeneous media are juxtaposed so as to draw attention to their differences. A good example of a collage is Fig. 12, a work produced in Nathdwara in the 1930s. It is clear that the silhouettes of Krishna and the *gopis* are cut-outs of popular prints pasted on a painted surface representing the idyllic landscape of Braj. A collage such as Fig. 12 is made with the intention of emphasizing the textural dissimilarities of the painted surface and the print.³⁹

The second method of producing mixed-media *manoraths* is much more difficult to detect with the naked eye. Like the previous one, this process also entailed extracting the faces or busts of the devotees from photographs. Before pasting the cut-outs on the works, however, the cut-outs were rendered very thin by removing the unnecessary layers of paper from their backs until they became translucent, like onionskins. Once pasted and painted over, they were undetectable to the naked eye.

39. For similar collages, see J. Jain, cat. nos. VII.6, VII.26, VII.28, VII.24. For an introduction to collages which adopt landscapes painted in Nathdwara, see J. Jain 78–79 and *passim*.



FIGURE 12.
Krishna and the Gopis in a Landscape.
Collage; c. 1930s.
17.9 x 24 in. (45.5 x 61 cm).

This process is explained by Kajri Jain: “The photographs, printed on special imported matt paper (which enabled overpainting), would have much of their backing scraped away to make them as thin as possible before they were carefully pasted in place and overpainted to merge with the rest of the painting.”⁴⁰ This technique was adopted in the execution of Fig. 13a. This unfinished memorial portrait is extremely valuable in understanding the technique of execution. In the close-up (Fig. 13b) one can hardly see the physiognomic traits of the sitter. Though barely perceptible, they were just visible enough for a painter to enhance them with colour, so retaining the likeness of

40. See K. Jain 382–383 n. 12. The same technical process is also explained in Ruia 69.