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## Composite paintings – portrayal of the surreal and fantastic in Indian art

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**Abstract:** This article studies the genre of “Composite” animal paintings from the Mughal, Deccani and other courts of medieval India. Animals have been depicted in paintings which include the Ajanta murals. These include mythical and fantastic animals. Indian art includes depictions of animals which are made up of human figures or other elements from nature. Composite painting includes images that are made of parts from different beings, such as humans, animals, marine beings, birds etc. Composite painting was most popular during the Mughal era. The idea of composite painting is the imagination of the artist who is trying to say much more and convey a deeper meaning through his art. The composite animals cease to be seen as mere physical forms. Each symbolizes a thought or idea that influences the emotion of man. This article traces some composite paintings and meanings behind them.

**Keywords:** Composite painting, Mughal painting, Deccan painting, Nari kunjara, Pashu kunjara, Animals in art.

**Introduction:** *What is a composite painting?*

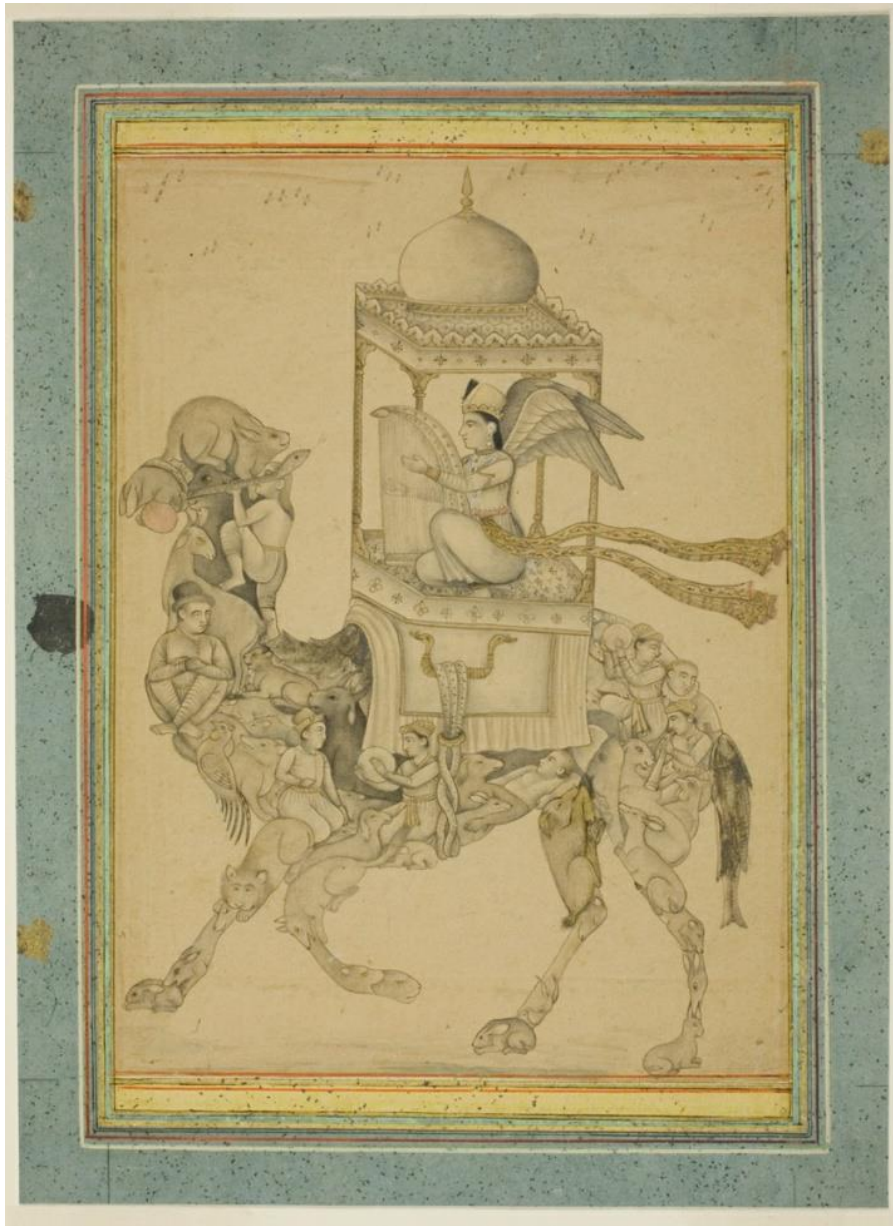
Composite painting includes images that are made of parts from different beings, such as humans, animals, birds and marine beings. Composite-ness is prevalent in Indian arts, with composites being made by clubbing human figures, animals and demons [1]. Composite animal paintings find resonance in ancient Indian art. The *Yali and vyala* are all mythical animals in Hindu mythology. There are *vyalas* who reside in water and are called *jalcharin*. Example is the *makara* - crocodile and the *jala hastin* - water elephant and *jala turaga* - water horse [3]. The mythical aerial animals are called *vyomacharin* and terrestrial ones are the *bhucharini* [4]. Composite animals were a Mughal and Deccan speciality. Requiring great skill on the part of the artist, the best of these images depict a single animal composed of several others. Other schools have depicted composite animals as well. Some composite paintings depict only women inside of the animal's body, called *Nari kunjara* motif, commonly seen in composite elephants. A composite painting which has only animals inside of the animal is called a *pashu kunjara*.

Composite painting in its modern avatar is very much alive which combines various elements from nature and objects to create interesting art whose meaning is left to the beholder to comprehend. “Composite art represents a new way of finding wholeness and unity. It is a form of creative art that can dissolve boundaries and limitations, propose new possibilities, embrace multiple viewpoints and introduce novel ways of story-telling” says Thaneeya McArdle [2], online art trainer.

### Composite painting – examples from miniature artworks

Many Indian schools of miniature paintings have produced composite artworks. The Mughal and Deccan seem to be prominent, the others include the Rajput, Murshidabad and Delhi School. There are interesting examples to note which help us understand this genre of painting which is way out of the ordinary. Leaving the beholder amazed, probably confused but finally majorly impressed, that is the effect of composite art.

Some examples to illustrate this are presented which are in different collections across the world. In the painting from The Art Institute of Chicago, we see a *pari*, which translates as 'an angel', sitting on a composite camel on a 'howdah', a seat kept atop an animal. the composition is totally composite! There are people and animals inside the body of the camel all juxtaposed to form the animal. A fantastic being seems to be holding the 'howdah' aloft.



**Figure 1:** Angel or *pari* riding a composite camel, Deccan painting, 1700, Art Institute of Chicago, U S A.

This stunning 'buraq', a highly revered creature, is a symbol of the fusion of styles in Deccani painting. This depiction shows many traditions including Central Asia, Turkey, Iran and the indigenous. At the centre, there is an elephant, sheltering a frightened deer. It is an amazing composite depiction where the fantastic creature has snakes as her feet with lions behind them. Her tail comprises a dragon like creature who is spitting fire. There is a woman, an attacking tiger in the torso and aquatic animals in the upper hind legs. The painting has two ornate floral decorative bands around it, separated by plain bands. This painting is representative of the cosmopolitanism of the Deccan region of India, which has imbibed many cultures.





**Figure 2:** *Al-buraq*, Hyderabad, Deccan painting, 1770-75, National Museum, New Delhi, India.

An interesting composition from the collection at State Museum, Bhopal, India depicts a "pari" or an angel figure holding a composite animal, most probably a big cat like a tiger or leopard. A demon with the head of a ram is following from behind holding a spear. There are many scenes depicted inside the animal. Various animals including an elephant are juxtaposed with humans in different roles. This image maybe meant to depict the angelic, the human and the demonic elements in existence and the fact that they co-exist.



**Figure 3:** A "pari" holding a composite animal, Mughal-Rajput painting, 19th century, State Museum, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India.

A gouache painting on paper from an album of eighty-two paintings of Hindu deities from the British Museum, London, depicts Goddess Rati, consort of Manmantha, who is the goddess of love in Hindu mythology. Here she is depicted on a composite horse made up of five women, probably dancers and musicians. Goddess Rati is shown kneeling, aiming an arrow from the back of the horse. She holds the *ikshukodanda* - sugarcane bow and five arrows in



her hands, from her left shoulder hangs the quiver. Of the five women comprising her horse, three carry musical instruments: cymbals, *vina* - a stringed instrument and *mridanga* a barrel shaped drum. The fourth, with a *chauri* or flywhisk forms the rump, hind leg and tail of the horse. The fifth woman constitutes the horse's fourth leg. The painting is of the Company School, most likely Tanjore, South India. This is a depiction of *panchanari turaga* motif.



**Figure 4:** Goddess Rati on horse, Company School, 1850, British Museum, London.

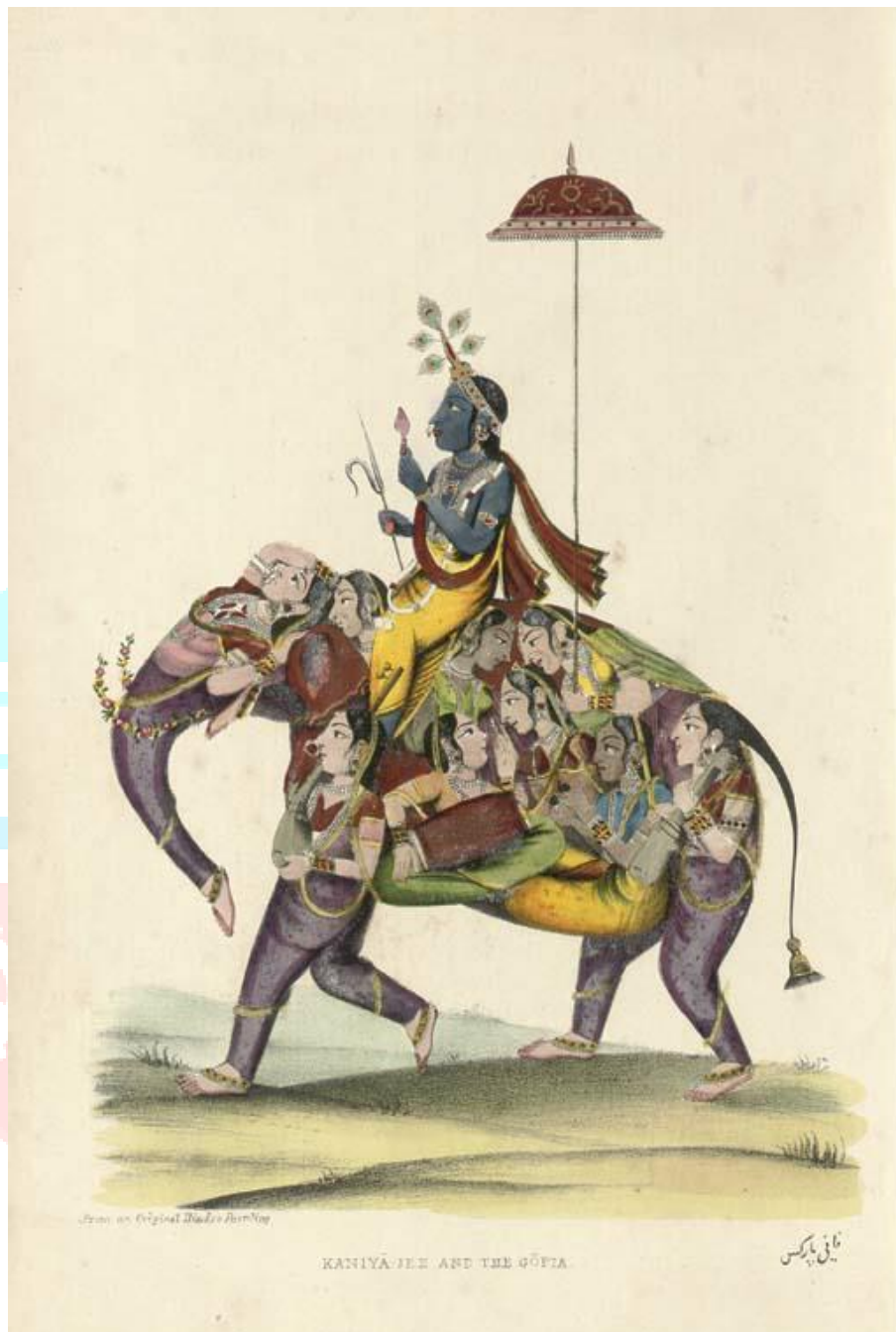
The painting of Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati on a composite version of Nandi, the bull vehicle of the God is very captivating. Made primarily in gorgeous colours of red and green, from a Rajasthani school, the picture depicts Lord Ganesha, their son following with a flywhisk. A musician holding a 'vina', a stringed musical instrument is leading the bull. Women make up the inside of the bull of whom some are in a dancing posture. The legs of the bull are the legs of two women who are painted accordingly. This is a "nari kunjara" painting. This artwork is also an 'inclusive' one with many components.



**Figure 5:** Lord Shiva and Parvati on a composite bull, Rajasthan School, 1775-1800 A.D, Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, New Delhi.

Lord Krishna on a "gopi" elephant is from the work by Fanny Parkes (1794-1875) - *Wanderings of a Pilgrim, in Search of the Picturesque, during Four-And-Twenty Years in the East*. Published in London by Pelham Richardson in 1850. The painting shows Lord Krishna seated on an elephant made out of "gopis" or cowherd girls who were the

companions of Lord Krishna at Vrindavan, the main *gopi* being Radha. The "gopis" are seen talking to each other and some are seen walking with musical instruments, forming the legs of the elephant. This painting seem to depict the association of Krishna and the "goips" of Vrindavan who were smitten with him. He is depicted with a goad in his right hand, holding a lotus bud in the other hand and a parasol overhead. This is a *nari kunjara* depiction.



**Figure 6:** Lord Krishna on a 'gopi'-elephant, 1850 A.D,

In trying to understand the meanings behind these composite artworks one can clearly see that the artist is trying to convey more than one idea. The paintings depict a greater reality depicted within the body of the animal. Therein lies the compositeness and yet an amazing unity of all things[5].

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6. Images are from Wikimedia Commons ( Public Domain)

