



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Call Of The Desert - Splendid Artworks From India

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Introduction - a desert defined

The New Encyclopaedia defines “In geography, a desert is a landscape form or region that receives very little precipitation. More specifically, it is defined as an area that receives an average annual precipitation of less than 250 millimeters (mm) (10 inches (in) ... Because deserts are so dry, they are ideal places for artifacts and fossils to be preserved. Humans who travel into deserts unprepared, particularly without carrying an adequate supply of water, have a slim chance of survival. The high heat causes rapid loss of water in the form of sweat. Without water, a person in a desert could die of thirst in a couple of days”.

But it is also true that the deserts have a magic of their own. It has served as a muse for artists and poets. Some see it as a challenge and have undertaken journeys across deserts. There are a great many things to be celebrated about the desert.

A verse on deserts reads -

“The dunes rise high, like waves of gold,
A land where stories of adventure are told,
Camels roam, their silhouettes etched against the sky, As the sun
beats down, from on high.
The nomads here, are tough and strong,
Their resilience, a story to be told,
Living in harmony with the land,
Where water is scarce, but spirits are bold.
The desert holds secrets deep within,
A land of mystery and ancient kin,
It's a place of challenge and test,
But also a place of peace and rest”.....N.Ellis.

Deserts in India - an interesting space

Deserts are both hot and cold. India has the Rann of Kutch in Gujarat and Thar in Rajasthan. There are relatively small deserts like Thal Desert in the states of Punjab and Haryana in northwestern India and Tharangambadi Desert in Tamil Nadu. Cold desert called Spiti Desert in the Spiti Valley of Himachal Pradesh and Desert of Ladakh in northernmost India. What do these deserts hold except for the

technical elements? How did life happen here? Various artists have tried to capture the essence of the history, culture and the desert's nomadic people on canvas. A small exploration would be needed.

The "Rann of Kutch" is a place from the history of mankind that began with early Neolithic settlements. It was later settled by the Indus Valley Civilization, Maurya and Gupta empires. The site is largely located in the present-day Indian state of Gujarat, particularly in the district of Kutch, after which it is named. Some parts extend into the Pakistani province of Sindh. It is a large area of saline mudflats, consisting of the Great Rann and the Little Rann. The word Rann means "desert" in Gujarati language. Due to the strong seasonal fluctuations in the weather, the vegetation in this region consists mainly of grass and thorny scrub. The Rann of Kutch is home to large herbivores, including the Indian wild ass. The Indian Wild Ass Sanctuary in the Little Rann is one of the last places where the endangered Indian Wild Ass can still be found. It is also home to Chinkara, Nilgai, and blackbuck as well as large carnivores such as wolf, striped hyena, desert wildcat and caracal. The Nilgai and the blackbuck are endangered species. There are over 200 bird species in the Rann of Kutch, including the endangered dwarf florican and houbara bustard. The seasonal wetlands provide habitat for many water birds, including the Rosy Crane and the Lesser Flamingo. The Kutch Desert Wildlife Sanctuary is the largest and is known for "Flamingo City" where thousands of flamingos nest and breed.

The "Thar" in Rajasthan - the Thar Desert - is an arid region with rolling sand hills on the Indian subcontinent. It lies partly in the state of Rajasthan in north-western India and partly in the provinces of Punjab and Sindh (Sind) in eastern Pakistan. The name Thar is derived from Thul, the general term for the sand ridges of the region. The desert vegetation consists mostly of herbs or stunted scrub; occasionally drought-resistant trees grow in the landscape, especially in the east. Acacias and euphorbias, which consist of gum arabic, can be found on the hills. The Khajri (or Khejri) tree grows everywhere in the plains. The sparsely populated grasslands are home to blackbucks, Chikara (gazelles) and some feathered game, mainly partridges and quails. Among the migratory birds, sand grouse, ducks and geese are widespread. The desert is also home to the endangered great bustard.

Myriad hues - culture in the desert

Over the years, the desert areas under consideration here have been ruled by various kings like the Rajputs, Marathas and even muslim rulers, resulting in the diverse culture of Rajasthan, which has produced numerous beautiful forts with great diversity in the architecture, language and customs of the people, and each region having its own folk culture.

Rajasthani people who live in these desert areas form an ethno-linguistic group that is distinct in its language, history, cultural and religious practices, social structure, literature, and art. However, there are many different castes and communities, with diversified traditions of their own. Major sub-ethnic groups are Jats, Rajputs, Brahmans, Bishnois, Gurjars, Yadavs, Meenas, Berwas, Charans, Meghwals, Malis, Kolis, Agrawals, Barnwals, Kumhars and Kumawats. The cultural elements make for a very unique ethos.

The folk music and folk dance of Rajasthan are similar due to their geographical limitations but differ in their unique style. Manganiyars and Langas are two well-known groups that have contributed to Rajasthani folk music. They perform 'ragas' (songs) for various purposes. For example, in the pre-monsoon season, they perform ragas to call for rain. Other famous groups are banjaras, mirasis, jogis and many more. Many traditional instruments are used by them, including sarangi, kamayach, dhols, shenhai and others. Folk songs were usually sung on special occasions such as weddings or births, or they were passed on to tell a story of bravery or a romantic tale. They were usually sung in the form of ballads.

The dance is also varied. The dances differed from tribe to tribe. They were mainly used to entertain the people and the king. Some of the dances are 'Chan', 'Ghoomer', 'Bhopa', 'Tejali' and 'Kathpuli'. The 'Ghoomer dance', which originated in Udaipur, has gained international recognition and appreciation.

Rajasthani cuisine is known for its various spices and sweetness. Rajasthan is best known for dalbati - a dish of dal and wheat flour kneaded with yoghurt and soaked in ghee. It is also famous for kachori - the kachori in Rajasthan comes in two varieties: sweet and spicy. The spicy kachori is called pyaaz or onion kachori, while the sweet kachori is called mawa kachori. 'Ghewar' and 'Gheriya' are some delicious sweet dishes that originate from Mewar.

The architectural style in Rajasthan is as diverse as its inhabitants. There are mixed style with Islamic, Hindu, colonial and modern architecture. Rajasthan has monumental buildings like forts, temples and 'havelis', historical sites with different designs and architectural styles. The Jain temple in Ranakpur was built in the 15th century. The architectural style is Maru Gurjara architecture. It is a West Indian architectural style with various domes and carvings on the pillars and ceilings. The Umaid Bhavan Palace in Jodhpur is a Beaux-Arts style architecture with a mixture of Eastern and Western architectural styles, although it was built by Maharaja Jai Singh II, a Hindu ruler. Jaisalmer Fort or Golden Fort were built in 1156 AD by the Rajput ruler Rawal Jaisal. The fort, houses, several gates, Jain temples and havelis and has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Camels are common animals in Rajasthan, whose biology is designed for survival in water scarcity, extreme winds, heat and cold. Most camps in Rajasthan offer 'camel rides' and one learns how well camels can move in the desert. 'Camel fairs' are held every year in Bikaner, Pushkar and other regions. This is a kind of festival or celebration dedicated to the desert ship and its owners. There are various events and competitions like camel races and camel dances that are held for fun. Festivals in Rajasthan also include the Mewar Festival, Teej Festival, Gangaur Festival, Elephant Festival, Dussehra Festival, Desert Festival, Summer Festival, Winter Festival, Rajasthan International Folk Festival, Braj Holi, Adventure Festival, Jaipur Literature Festival, Marwar Festival and many more.

The women wear sarees with the 'odhni' covering their heads as a sign of respect. The men wear dhotis and kurtas with a head covering called pagri or safah. The patterns on their clothes are either embroidered or dotted. The material of the clothes is usually cotton and for women silk is also used.

Artworks on the desert - real yet magical

Rajasthani painting primarily pertains to the miniature painting style that predominantly emerged in the autonomous Hindu states of Rajasthan in western India during the 16th to 19th century. It originated from manuscript illustrations in Western India, but the influence of the Mughals became apparent in its later stages of evolution. Here we are however also going to focus on artworks on places in the desert; wall paintings, oil, watercolour, sketches and drawings since yore and contemporary ones as well. The artists have captured daily life, flora and fauna, folklore and history among other subjects in their art. Let's try to see a desert in its different aspects through the eyes of artists over time!

Maharana Pratap Singh, was a king of the Kingdom of Mewar, a princely state in north-western India in the present-day state of Rajasthan. He is notable for leading the Rajput resistance against the expansionist policy of the Mughal Emperor Akbar including the Battle of Haldighati. Shown here is his portrait made by Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906). As an artist he is remembered as one of the best examples of the fusion of European academic art with a purely Indian sensibility. He has captured the grandeur of the heroic and outstanding Rajput ruler in this painting standing outside in rocky terrain with his weapons..



Figure 1 - Portrait of Maharana Pratap Singh, oil on canvas, by Raja Ravi Varma, 19th century, Collection of H.H. Maharana of Mewar, Shambhu Niwas Palace, Udaipur, Rajasthan.

A painting of a soldier or a kingsman in the desert; he holds his weapon and water bag, and he is wearing a pagdi which protects from the strong sun. He is wearing a dhoti and a sash at his waist.



Figure 2 - Man in the desert with a rifle and water pouch, unknown artist, 19th century, Wellcome Library, London, U.K

'Dhola Maru' is a famous folk love story from Rajasthan. It revolves around the love between Dhola, a warrior prince, and Maru, a beautiful princess. Despite facing numerous obstacles and challenges, including opposition from their families and societal norms, Dhola and Maru remain deeply devoted to each other. The story highlights themes of love, loyalty, and perseverance amidst adversity. Dhola Maru is celebrated through songs, dances, performing and paintings, making it a cherished part of the region's cultural heritage. Seen here is a drawing of Dhola and Maru on a camel as a depiction of a musical mode or 'Raga – Ragini' of the classical Indian music system, named after them, making it a Ragamala artwork. Also a miniature painting celebrating the story from the Jodhpur school of miniature painting is showcased here.

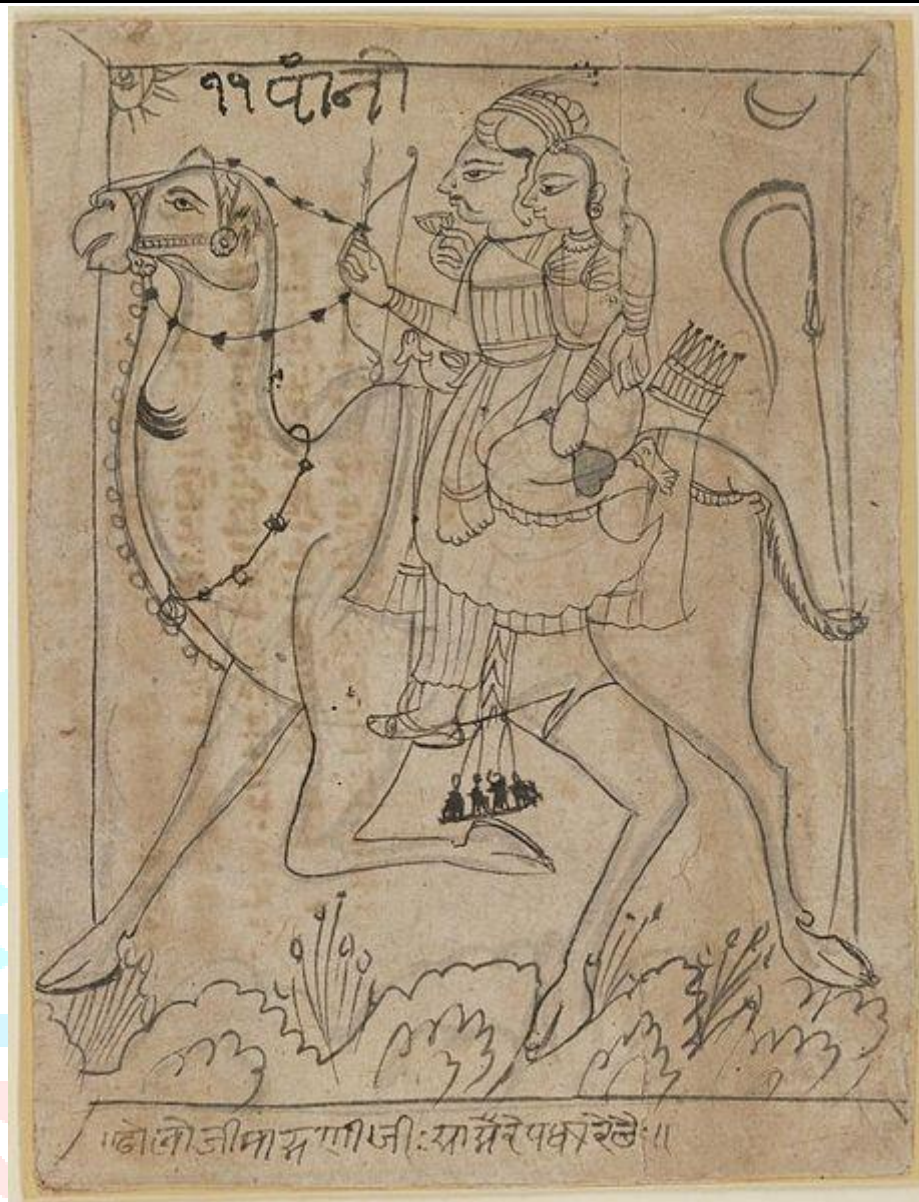


Figure 3 - Maru Ragini (Dhola and Maru riding on a camel), drawing, Rajasthan, circa 1750.



Figure 4 -Maru Ragini (Dhola and Maru riding on a camel), Jodhpur, Marwar, Rajasthan, circa 1830 LACMA, U S A.

Shreyas Makwana is a Mumbai based artist, he mainly works with watercolor and acrylic colours on paper as well as on canvas. He is a self-taught artist with an experience of over 20 years. His areas of focus include cityscapes, landscapes, Indian traditional art, Hindu Gods in art, and sketching as well. Seen here is one of his well recognised painting of the desertscape of the Thar desert.



Figure 5 - Painting of the Thar Desert near Jaisalmer city in Rajasthan, India. Camels are resting with their owners on sand dunes, acrylic on canvas, Shreyas Makwana, 21st century.

Laila and Majnu is a legendary love story originating from Arabia, popularized by Persian poet Nizami Ganjavi in the 12th century. It tells of the tragic romance between Qays ibn al-Mulawwah (Majnun) and Layla bint Mahdi (Laila). Despite being deeply in love, their families opposed their union, leading to separation. Majnun's unrequited love for Laila drove him to madness, wandering the desert and composing poetry about their love. Eventually, they both died pining for each other, becoming symbols of true and enduring love in Arabic literature.

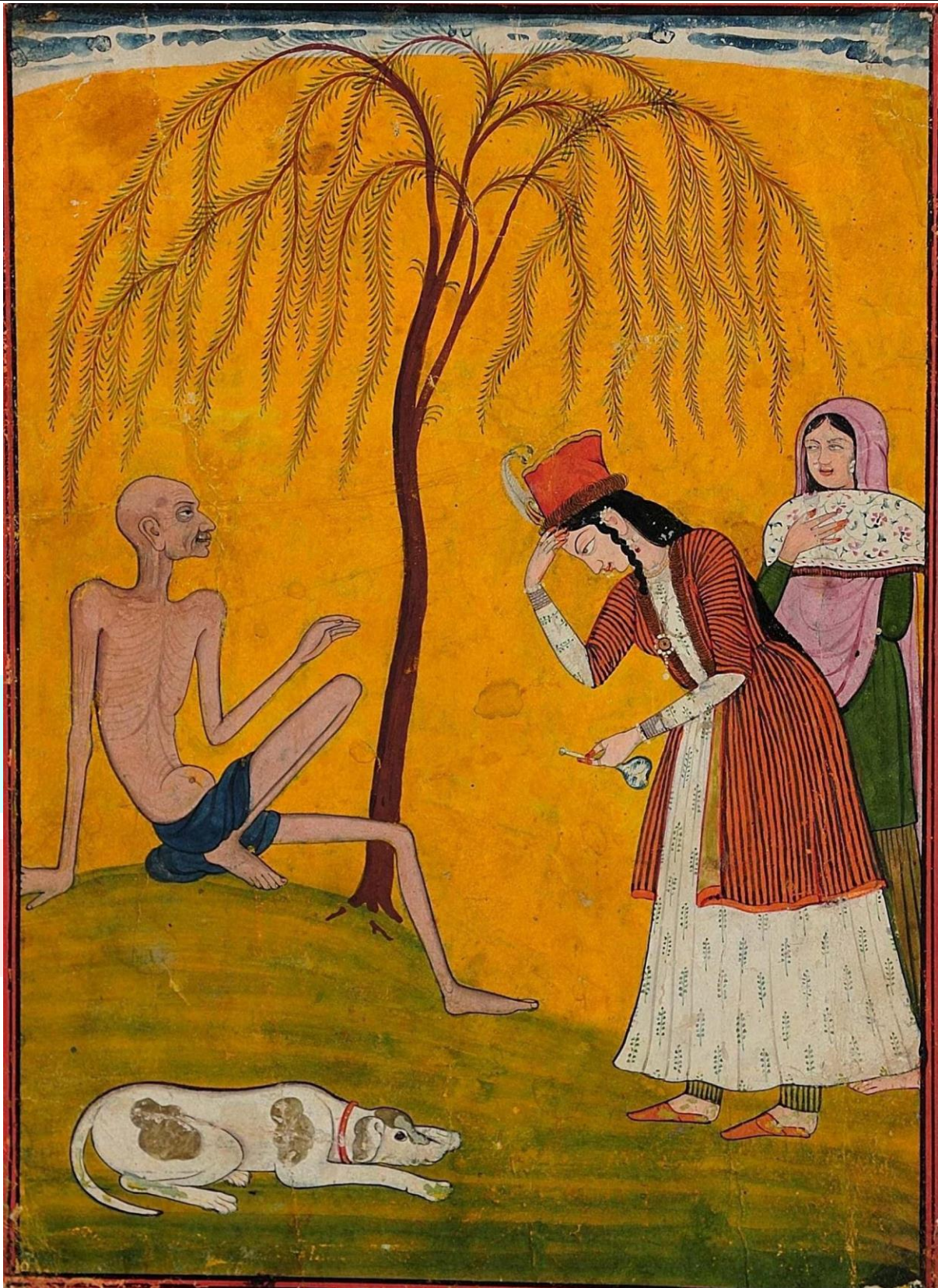


Figure 6 - Laila meets Majnu in the desert, miniature painting, Kangra- Basohli, circa 1775. From the collection of Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad, India.

Maqbool Fida Husain (1915-2011) was an Indian artist known for executing bold, vibrantly coloured narrative paintings in a modified Cubist style. Seen below is a painting by the famous artist where Laila meets Majnu in the desert.



Figure 7 - Laila-Majnun in the desert painting by M. F. Husain, 20th century.

Bikaner is a city in the northwest of the state of Rajasthan, It is located 330 kilometres (205 mi) northwest of the state capital, Jaipur. Formerly the capital of the princely Bikaner State, the city was founded by Rao Bika, a Rajput chief of the Rathore clan in 1488 CE. Seen here is painting of a 'sowar', soldier, of the Camel Corps of the princely state.





Figure 8 - A sowar of the Bikaner Camel Corps. Original source : From a watercolour by AC Lovett 1910. Published in MacMunn & Lovett, *Armies of India*, 1911.

We can conclude that the desert and the stories built around it have inspired amazing art in India and continues to do so. The paintings are found to be more colourful than the desert because the desert by itself is not so much, given endless stretches of sand dunes with few oases here and there; so in a way they make up for the lack of colour. But life exists in deserts and so do artworks about it.

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8. Images are from the public domain.

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Links to the images-**Figure 1 - Portrait of Maharana Pratap Singh.**

Source -https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:RajaRaviVarma_MaharanaPratap.jpg

Figure 2 - Man in the desert with a rifle and water pouch.

Source:

https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gouache_painting_of_a_man_in_the_desert_with_a_rifle_and_water_pouch._Wellcome_V0045610.jpg

Figure 3 - Maru Ragini (Dhola and Maru riding on a camel).

Source: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Brooklyn_Museum_-_Maru_Ragini_%28Dhola_and_Maru_riding_on_a_Camel%29.jpg

Figure 4 -Maru Ragini (Dhola and Maru riding on a camel).

Source:

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Dhola_and_Maru_on_a_Camel_LACMA_M.75.59.1.jpg

Figure 5 - Painting of the Thar Desert near Jaisalmer city in Rajasthan, India.

Source: <https://pixels.com/profiles/shreyas-makwana>

Figure 6 - Laila meets Majnu in the desert.

Source:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Majnun_Sitting_In_The_Desert_Under_a_Tree.jpg

Figure 7 - Laila-Majnun in the desert painting by M. F. Husain, Source:

<https://www.amazon.in/Adventures%C2%AE-Laila-Majnu-Painting-stretched-PineWood/dp/B0B6J5M5PT?th=1>

Figure 8 - A sowar of the Bikaner Camel Corps.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bikaner_Camel_Corps.jpg