

KRISHNA-VISHNU SLAYING PAÑCAJANA AND OBTAINING THE PĀÑCAJANYA CONCH

An illustration from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Book X, Chapter 45

Basohli School, Punjab Hills, c. 1740–1760

Opaque pigments heightened with gold and raised ornamental details on paper

Sheet: approximately 21.5 × 29 cm

Painted field: approximately 17 × 25 cm

Former attribution: Pahari/Basohli, nineteenth century; Matsya killing the demon who stole the Vedas.

Present attribution: Basohli School, Punjab Hills, c.1740–1760.

Present identification of subject: Krishna-Vishnu slaying the conch-form demon Pañcajana, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, X.45.40–43, although the composition participates in an older western Pahari iconographic tradition of Matsya-Vishnu combating a marine demon.



Catalogue Note

Among the more extraordinary narrative paintings of the western Punjab Hills is this intensely coloured and almost otherworldly image of a blue divinity confronting a

monstrous orange adversary beneath the sea. The deity advances through an ocean rendered not as transparent water but as a vast charcoal-grey field of curling currents. His adversary emerges from an enormous pale conch-like body, brandishing sword and shield. Above them, the terrestrial world has been reduced to the narrowest strip of brilliant yellow ground, green hills, flowering shrubs and tiny emblematic trees.

The painting has previously been interpreted as **Matsya**, the fish incarnation of Vishnu, destroying the demon who stole the Vedas. That identification was used when the picture appeared at Capitulum Art in Brescia in 2017 and was substantially retained when it reappeared at Hessink's in 2018.

A close examination of its unusual iconography, however, opens a more compelling possibility. The image corresponds strikingly to an episode in **Book X, Chapter 45 of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa**: Krishna's descent beneath the ocean to confront **Pañcajana**, the demon specifically described in the Sanskrit text as moving through the water **in the form of a conch**, and Krishna's subsequent acquisition of the shell that becomes associated with his famous conch, **Pāñcajanya**. The text explicitly states that Krishna entered the water, killed Pañcajana, and took the conch that had formed from or around the demon's body.

This identification explains one of the painting's most peculiar visual features: the adversary is not simply a demon fighting in the sea. **His body itself has been conceived as an enormous conch.**

At the same time, the earlier Matsya identification should not be discarded without qualification. A documented western Pahari tradition exists in which Matsya-Vishnu combats the demon associated with the theft of the Vedas, including a Chamba or Basohli painting of c.1710 whose composition Christie's relates to an earlier Mankot prototype. The present painting therefore inhabits an iconographic territory in which established visual formulas for Vishnu's marine manifestations could readily overlap.

The safest interpretation is consequently to recognize the work primarily as **Krishna-Vishnu and Pañcajana**, while acknowledging its significant relationship to older Matsya iconography.

I. The story: Krishna, Sāndipani and the origin of Pāñcajanya

The episode represented here occurs relatively late in Krishna's youthful narrative in the tenth *skandha*, or Book X, of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*.

It follows the dramatic Mathura cycle: Krishna and Balarama have left the pastoral world of Vraja, defeated Kamsa, liberated their parents Vasudeva and Devaki, and restored Ugrasena to the throne.

Krishna and Balarama are then initiated according to the prescribed rites and sent to receive formal education from the celebrated sage **Sāndīpani**, whose *āśrama* was associated with Avanti, the region of modern Ujjain.

The divine brothers prove astonishing pupils.

The *Bhāgavata* emphasizes the extraordinary speed with which they master the traditional branches of knowledge and the sixty-four arts. Their education encompasses not merely scripture but the arts and sciences appropriate to princes.

When their education is complete, Krishna and Balarama approach Sāndīpani and ask what they may give him as **guru-dakṣiṇā**—the offering made by a pupil to his teacher in gratitude for instruction.

Sāndīpani consults his wife.

Knowing that these are no ordinary pupils, they ask for something that would be impossible for ordinary men:

the return of their dead son.

The boy had disappeared at **Prabhāsa**, on the coast, and was believed to have perished in the ocean.

Krishna and Balarama immediately accept the request.

The confrontation with the Ocean

The brothers travel by chariot to Prabhāsa.

There Krishna addresses the Ocean itself and demands the restoration of his guru's son.

The Ocean recognizes the divinity standing before it and denies responsibility for the boy's disappearance.

Instead it reveals the presence of another being within its depths.

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* X.45.40 describes him as the great Daitya:

Pañcājana

and, crucially, describes him as an underwater demon who bears or assumes **the form of a conch**.

This single textual detail is of exceptional importance for understanding the present painting.

The painter had to solve a difficult visual problem.

How does one represent a demon who is simultaneously a living adversary and a conch?

The answer here is wonderfully direct.

Pañcajana is given recognizable demonic anatomy—orange-red head and limbs, beard, eye, hands and weapons—but these emerge from an enormous shell-like body.

The painter has effectively made the Sanskrit description visible.

II. Krishna descends beneath the sea

On hearing the Ocean's explanation, Krishna does not hesitate.

He enters the water.

There, in the depths of the sea, he encounters Pañcajana and kills him.

The painting appears to capture **the instant of supernatural combat immediately before the demon's destruction**.

Krishna confronts Pañcajana at extraordinarily close quarters.

The demon raises a large curved sword while protecting himself with a circular shield. His huge eye stares toward Krishna. His mouth opens beneath a dense black beard. His orange-red body creates a violent chromatic contrast with Krishna's blue skin.

But Krishna is not represented merely as the youthful cowherd of Vraja.

He assumes an explicitly **Vishnu-like supernatural form**, equipped with multiple arms and divine attributes.

This is important iconographically.

The *Bhāgavata* repeatedly permits Krishna's identity as the Supreme Vishnu to become visible within narrative scenes. A Pahari painter therefore did not necessarily distinguish rigidly between “Krishna” and “Vishnu” in the manner expected by modern cataloguing.

The figure is Krishna **as Vishnu**, or Vishnu manifested through Krishna.

This also helps explain why earlier cataloguers could plausibly read the deity as Matsya.

III. The demon is slain—but the boy is not there

The story then takes an unexpected turn.

Krishna kills Pañcajana and searches within him for Sāndīpani's son.

The boy is **not there**.

But Krishna discovers or takes the great conch associated with the demon. Verse 42 describes Krishna taking the conch that had formed from the demon's body and returning to his chariot.

The conch thereafter becomes associated with Krishna as **Pāñcajanya**.

The *Vishnu Purāṇa* preserves a closely related version: Pañcajana lives in the form of a conch; Krishna plunges into the sea, kills him, and takes the shell formed from him.

The object is no ordinary trumpet.

Pāñcajanya becomes one of Krishna's great attributes.

Its most famous later appearance comes at the beginning of the *Bhagavad Gītā*. As the armies assemble at Kurukshetra, Krishna blows **Pāñcajanya**, Arjuna blows Devadatta and Bhima his mighty Paundra.

Thus the shell acquired in this obscure underwater adventure ultimately becomes one of the most recognizable objects associated with Krishna.

The present painting may therefore illustrate nothing less than the **mythological origin of one of Krishna's defining attributes**.

IV. From the ocean to the kingdom of death

The *Bhāgavata* narrative does not end with Pañcajana's death.

Because Sāndīpani's son has not been found, Krishna and Balarama continue to **Samyamani**, the city of Yama, lord of death.

There Krishna blows the newly acquired conch.

The tremendous sound announces his arrival.

Yama recognizes Krishna's supreme identity and comes before him. Krishna demands that his guru's son be returned. Yama obeys.

The brothers bring the boy back to Sāndīpani.

The impossible *guru-dakṣiṇā* has been fulfilled.

The episode therefore has a deeper theological structure than a simple demon-slaying story.

Krishna passes successively through:

human education → ocean → demon → death → restoration of life.

He masters knowledge, conquers the sea, destroys the demon and finally overcomes death itself.

And the physical trophy of this passage is **Pāñcajanya**, the conch whose sound will later proclaim Krishna's presence on the battlefield of Kurukshetra.

V. What exactly does the painting depict?

The identification requires some qualification because the painting has a complicated attributional history.

When offered by [Capitolium Art](#) in Brescia in June 2017, the subject was described as: Vishnu in his Matsya avatar killing the demon Ajnana who had stolen the sacred texts.

Capitolium already classified the work as **Pahari, Basohli**, although it dated it to the nineteenth century. The catalogue recorded dimensions of 17 × 25 cm, evidently corresponding approximately to the painted field rather than the complete surviving sheet.

When the work subsequently appeared at Hessink's in July 2018, it was again identified with **Matsya Avatara**, although the geographical attribution was broadened to Pahari School.

The Matsya interpretation was therefore not an isolated error.

Indeed, there is a real western Pahari iconographic tradition behind it.

Christie's recently catalogued an illustration from a *Daśāvatāra* series as **Matsyavatara**, Chamba or Basohli, c.1710. There Vishnu in fish incarnation confronts Ajnana/Hayagriva after the demon has stolen the Vedas. Christie's notes that the composition follows an earlier rendering associated with the so-called First Horizontal *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* attributed to Mankot.

Consequently, a western Pahari viewer was already familiar with an image of **Vishnu entering an aquatic realm to combat a demon**.

This is important.

VI. Matsya and Pañcajanya: why the ambiguity exists

The present painting does not fit comfortably into the rigid categories sometimes imposed by modern cataloguing.

Its deity possesses Vishnu's supernatural character and appears partly piscine. Its enemy possesses the unmistakable visual form of a great conch.

That allows two traditions to approach one another:

Matsya — Vishnu enters the primordial waters and defeats the being associated with the stolen Vedas;

and

Pañcajana — Krishna, himself Vishnu incarnate, enters the sea and kills a demon specifically described as conch-formed.

An eighteenth-century Pahari painter working within an inherited repertory of compositions could readily borrow the visual formula of one aquatic manifestation of Vishnu to illustrate another.

Indeed, the history of Indian painting repeatedly demonstrates that artists inherited **pictorial formulas**, not modern museum taxonomies.

A workshop might know how “Vishnu fighting a demon beneath the water” was conventionally represented and adapt that composition to a new textual episode.

For this reason the slight Matsya-like appearance of Krishna should **not be treated as evidence against the Pañcajana identification**.

It may instead preserve evidence of how the painter constructed the image.

The most unusual and textually specific element remains the **conch-bodied adversary**, which accords exceptionally well with the language of *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* X.45.

VII. The extraordinary conception of the ocean

Perhaps the painting's greatest visual achievement is its water.

Almost the entire sheet is submerged.

The painter has not represented the ocean using transparent blue washes or orderly horizontal wavelets. Instead, the sea becomes an enormous charcoal-grey mass animated by hundreds of pale curling lines.

Currents turn into loops.

Loops expand into vortices.

Parallel lines separate and reunite.

At several points they resemble fingerprints, geological strata or the rings of ancient wood.

The result is remarkably modern in appearance, although entirely rooted in an older western Pahari vocabulary.

The water becomes almost **solid**.

Krishna and Pañcājana appear to fight not simply in water but inside a primordial substance.

This treatment has proved particularly useful in reconsidering the attribution.

Closely comparable densely patterned water occurs in early western Pahari painting, including works associated with Mankot, and—most significantly for the present discussion—in *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* compositions associated with **Manaku**.

The water therefore does not prove Basohli by itself.

Rather, it identifies the picture as belonging to an older western Pahari visual tradition in which water could be rendered as a strongly patterned supernatural field.

It is when this evidence is combined with the figures, trees, hills and palette that Basohli emerges as the strongest attribution.

VIII. Why Basohli?

The attribution to the **Basohli School** rests upon the convergence of numerous independent stylistic characteristics.

The painting does not merely possess “Basohli colours.”

Its entire conception is rooted in the Basohli aesthetic.

The face

Krishna's profile is sharply constructed.

The forehead descends into a prominent, elongated nose. The eye is disproportionately large and strongly outlined. The mouth is tiny and red; the chin compact.

There is little soft modelling of the cheek.

The face is therefore constructed principally from **contour**.

It is a graphic rather than volumetric conception of physiognomy.

This is one of the fundamental characteristics of the older Basohli manner.

The eye in particular possesses an almost supernatural intensity. It does not simply observe Pañcājana. It announces Krishna's divine presence.

IX. The hands and anatomy

Krishna's multiple arms are elongated and comparatively tubular.

The fingers are long and rhythmically disposed rather than anatomically subtle. Changes of direction at the wrists can be abrupt.

This is significant because mature Guler and Kangra painters became celebrated for extraordinarily sensitive hands—supple fingers, subtle gestures and natural transitions between wrist and palm.

Here anatomy serves another purpose.

The arms radiate around Krishna almost as **divine vectors**.

They articulate supernatural multiplicity.

The priority is iconographic legibility and visual force rather than observed anatomy.

This is entirely consistent with the older Basohli tradition.

X. Pañcājana: expressive violence

The demon is perhaps even more revealing.

His enormous eye, open mouth, dense black beard, brilliant orange-red flesh and violently raised sword are intentionally excessive.

No attempt has been made to make him psychologically subtle.

He is **terror made visible**.

That preference for expressive exaggeration is central to Basohli painting.

The artist's task is not to persuade the viewer that such a creature could exist anatomically.

It is to create the appropriate emotional state—the *rasa* of danger, supernatural violence and divine victory.

The brilliant orange body set against the dark grey ocean and blue Krishna creates a chromatic confrontation before the viewer has even deciphered the narrative.

XI. Colour as emotional architecture

Basohli colour rarely behaves passively.

Here the palette is constructed from saturated chromatic oppositions:

blue Krishna;

orange-red demon;

pale conch;

charcoal-grey ocean;

**brilliant yellow terrestrial band;
intense green hills.**

The colours do not dissolve into one another.

They collide.

This is one of the clearest distinctions between the present picture and the later lyrical Pahari traditions.

Colour establishes the painting's emotional architecture.

Krishna remains luminous within darkness.

Pañcājana burns against it.

The terrestrial world shines above the supernatural abyss.

XII. Hills and space

The narrow landscape strip at the top of the sheet is remarkably informative.

The hills are not conceived as receding geological masses.

They appear as overlapping green lobes bounded by strong dark contours. Small pinkish ridges occasionally articulate their edges.

There is almost no atmospheric perspective.

The painter tells us that one hill stands behind another primarily through **overlap**.

The brilliant yellow field behind them similarly behaves less as natural sky than as a chromatic zone.

Space has therefore been **constructed decoratively rather than optically**.

This is strongly compatible with the older Basohli aesthetic.

XIII. Trees and vegetation

The trees offer perhaps the clearest distinction between the present picture and mature Guler or Kangra.

They are tiny.

Some appear as black or dark-green rounded masses mounted upon narrow trunks. Others resemble little umbrellas. Flowering shrubs consist of dense dark crowns upon which individual white, pink or pale blossoms have been applied.

They are not portraits of botanical species.

They are **signs for trees**.

The same applies to the small blossoms scattered across the green hills. They behave almost as decorative ornaments applied to the surface.

This emblematic conception of nature is fundamentally different from the increasingly botanical observation characteristic of later Guler and Kangra.

XIV. Why the painting is not Kangra

A Kangra attribution can be rejected with considerable confidence.

Mature Kangra painting generally favours:

delicate modelling;

supple anatomy;

graceful hands;

lyrical facial expression;

atmospheric depth;

botanically observed vegetation;

soft tonal relationships;

and an unusually sensuous relationship between figures and landscape.

The present painting displays almost the opposite tendencies.

Its faces are angular.

Its anatomy is graphic.

Its demon is grotesque.

Its colours are saturated.

Its landscape is shallow.

Its trees are symbolic.

Its ocean is almost abstract.

Its emotional register is heroic and violent rather than lyrical.

Calling this painting Kangra would therefore require explaining away virtually every major stylistic characteristic visible on the sheet.

XV. Why it is not mature Guler

Guler is a more complicated question.

The artistic histories of Basohli and Guler intersect profoundly during the eighteenth century, particularly through the family of **Pandit Seu, Manaku and Nainsukh** and their descendants.

Consequently, “Basohli” and “Guler” should not be imagined as impermeable boxes.

Artists moved.

Drawings circulated.

Compositions were copied.

Family workshops transmitted conventions across political boundaries.

Some of the very works most useful for understanding this painting are today classified as Guler although they retain substantial Basohli ancestry.

Nevertheless, mature Guler painting increasingly moves toward:

softer physiognomy;

greater anatomical coherence;

naturalistic gesture;

individualized vegetation;

deeper landscape;

and subtler colour.

The present painting remains firmly on the **older, more graphic and more intensely expressive side of that transition.**

Thus, if a single school must be named, **Basohli is preferable to Guler.**

XVI. Why certain features nevertheless look “non-Basohli”

This point deserves emphasis because it prevents the attribution from becoming artificially rigid.

Not every element in the painting corresponds to the canonical Basohli paintings of the late seventeenth century.

Nor should it.

The proposed date is approximately **1740–1760**, several decades after the great early Basohli masterpieces.

By then western Pahari painting was undergoing profound change.

The families of painters responsible for that transformation worked across Guler, Basohli, Jasrota and neighbouring courts.

Consequently the present work contains elements that might reasonably be described as **Guler-Basohli transitional**.

The somewhat more elaborate jewellery, certain details of the divine figure, the sophisticated organization of the water and aspects of the decorative border need not look identical to the earlier Rasamanjari-type Basohli vocabulary.

Indeed, if every detail looked like Basohli painting of c.1690, the proposed mid-eighteenth-century date would itself become questionable.

The picture is better understood as **Basohli in its dominant visual language while participating in the broader artistic exchanges transforming western Pahari painting around the middle of the eighteenth century**.

That distinction explains both the strength of the Basohli attribution and the occasional feature that seems less purely Basohli.

XVII. The earlier Basohli attribution at Capitolium

The rediscovery of the painting's 2017 auction history is significant.

On **15 June 2017**, it appeared at [Capitolium Art, Brescia](#) as part of Auction 217, *Fine Chinese, Islamic & Asian Art*.

Capitolium described it as:

India, Pahari, Basohli, 19th century

and interpreted the subject as Matsya killing Ajnana, the demon who had stolen the sacred texts.

The catalogue noted gold highlights and applied relief details and recorded a measurement of **17 × 25 cm**, presumably referring to the principal painted area. The estimate was **€1,000–1,500**.

This discovery is important for attributional history.

Our identification of Basohli was initially reached independently by examining the painting itself—particularly the face, hands, vegetation, hills and water.

Only subsequently was it established that **another auction house had already reached a Basohli attribution in 2017**.

Thus the present reassessment is not simply the imposition of a new school upon a previously generic Pahari painting.

Rather, it represents a **return to and substantial refinement of an earlier Basohli attribution**.

The principal revision concerns chronology.

Capitolium placed the painting in the nineteenth century.

The stylistic evidence assembled here suggests that a date approximately a century earlier, **c.1740–1760**, provides a substantially more convincing explanation.

XVIII. The Hessink appearance

The following year the picture reappeared at Hessink's Auctions on **7 July 2018**, lot 20.

There the geographical designation was broadened from Basohli to **Pahari School, Northern India**, and the painting was dated to the mid-nineteenth century.

The subject remained essentially the same: **Matsya Avatara**.

The work subsequently entered the present collection.

The documented auction history can therefore presently be reconstructed:

Capitolium Art, Brescia, 15 June 2017, lot 483

Pahari, Basohli, nineteenth century; Matsya-Vishnu killing the demon who stole the Vedas.

Hessink's Auctions, 7 July 2018, lot 20

Pahari School, Northern India, mid-nineteenth century; *Matsya Avatara*.

Present collection.

No named pre-2017 owner or consignor has yet been recovered from Capitolium's surviving public catalogue record.

XIX. Basohli and the illustration of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*

The *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* occupied a particularly important place in Pahari painting.

Its tenth book—the life of Krishna—provided artists with an almost inexhaustible repertoire of subjects: Krishna's birth, his childhood in Gokul, the destruction of demons, Kaliya, Govardhana, the gopis, departure for Mathura, the killing of Kamsa and the subsequent adventures of Krishna as prince and divine hero.

Several major *Bhāgavata* projects were produced in the western Punjab Hills.

For present purposes, two mid-eighteenth-century groups are particularly relevant.

XX. Manaku and the “Small Guler” *Bhāgavata*

Around 1740, **Manaku of Guler** undertook one of the most ambitious Pahari manuscript projects known: the so-called **Small Guler *Bhāgavata Purāṇa***.

The Metropolitan Museum's published catalogue describes it as a massive project intended to comprise hundreds of folios. The earlier portions were fully painted, while much of the later project survives as drawings. A representative sheet attributed to Manaku measures approximately **22 × 31 cm**, with a drawing around **18.2 × 28.8 cm**.

These dimensions immediately attracted attention during the investigation.

The present sheet is approximately:

21.5 × 29 cm

while Capitulum recorded the principal field at:

17 × 25 cm.

The height is remarkably close to the Manaku manuscript format.

More important than dimensions, however, are certain stylistic correspondences.

Manaku's *Bhāgavata* retains a powerful inheritance from older western Pahari painting: flattened figures, saturated colour, shallow landscape and emphatically patterned natural phenomena.

The famous treatment of turbulent water in works from this artistic environment provided one of the closest comparisons encountered for the extraordinary ocean in the present painting.

This does **not** establish that the present sheet comes from Manaku's manuscript.

Its border does not provide an exact match; its surviving reverse is complicated; its width differs; and no preparatory Pañcājana drawing matching this composition has been identified.

The appropriate conclusion is therefore:

The painting belongs to the same broad mid-eighteenth-century Basohli-Guler artistic environment as the Small *Bhāgavata* associated with Manaku, without presently being assignable to that manuscript or to Manaku himself.

XXI. The Large Guler-Basohli *Bhāgavata*

A second great project appeared approximately two decades later.

The so-called **Large Guler-Basohli *Bhāgavata Purāṇa***, generally dated c.1760–65, is associated with the first generation after Manaku and Nainsukh.

Christie's describes one major folio from this series as:

First Generation After Manaku and Nainsukh, Punjab Hills, North India, circa 1760–65.

This later series is enormously important for understanding the development from the vigorous older Basohli inheritance toward the increasingly refined Guler idiom.

But the present painting cannot readily belong to it.

Large-series folios are around **30 × 40 cm**, dramatically larger than the present 21.5 × 29 cm sheet.

The dimensional discrepancy is too great to explain by ordinary trimming.

Thus the Large *Bhāgavata* remains a valuable stylistic comparator but is **not a plausible manuscript source for the present sheet**.

XXII. What the manuscript comparisons actually tell us

The comparison with the major *Bhāgavata* projects should therefore be used carefully.

It establishes three things.

First, the present dimensions are entirely plausible for an eighteenth-century western Pahari narrative manuscript.

Second, the painting's visual language sits comfortably within the world of the **earlier, smaller, more conservative mid-century Pahari projects**.

Third, its relationship to Manaku's artistic environment helps explain why some features seem simultaneously Basohli and Guler.

But none of this requires the picture to have belonged to a known dispersed manuscript.

Indeed, it may represent a **separate Basohli workshop series whose surviving companion folios have not yet been recognized**.

That possibility should remain open.

XXIII. The decorative border

The border is another reason for resisting over-specific manuscript attribution.

The composition is enclosed by a narrow reddish-orange decorative band containing pale floral or foliate ornament, accompanied by fine dark and light rules and a broader buff margin.

This differs from the simpler red, black and white border architecture associated with many known Manaku and later Guler-Basohli *Bhāgavata* sheets.

The border does not argue against Basohli.

Borders varied between projects and could also be altered during later remounting.

But it does argue against casually inserting the painting into a famous manuscript merely because the dimensions and style are suggestive.

The correct hierarchy remains:

Basohli School — strong.

Mid-eighteenth century — strong to moderately strong.

Manaku artistic environment — meaningful comparison.

Manaku manuscript membership — unproven.

XXIV. The physical object and its history

The reverse indicates that the painting has experienced a complicated material life.

There are ruled areas, writing or documentary marks, staining and reinforcing material.

This raises several possibilities.

The painting may have been backed onto reused documentary paper at an early date.

It may have been reinforced after damage.

Its margins may have been trimmed.

The present border could conceivably have been modified during one of these interventions.

These questions cannot be settled from photographs alone.

A conservator experienced in Indian works on paper could potentially determine:

whether the painted sheet and backing are contemporary;

whether the border was executed at the same time as the principal composition;

whether the lateral margins have been trimmed;

whether earlier inscriptions survive beneath reinforcement;

and whether pigment and paper analysis supports the proposed eighteenth-century date.

Such examination might ultimately prove more valuable than another stylistic comparison.

XXV. The Basohli School in context

Basohli occupies a foundational position in the history of Pahari painting.

Emerging as one of the most distinctive court styles of the western Punjab Hills during the seventeenth century, Basohli painting developed a visual language of extraordinary intensity.

Its painters favoured:

brilliant saturated colour;
large expressive eyes;
strong profile heads;
hard contours;
shallow pictorial space;
decorative rather than naturalistic landscapes;
intensely patterned surfaces;
and dramatic emotional expression.

Nature itself was transformed into ornament.

Trees became signs.

Hills became chromatic forms.

Architecture became geometry.

Jewellery and textiles could be treated with almost tactile richness.

The objective was not to reproduce the visible world with optical accuracy.

It was to create a world adequate to **poetry, devotion and myth.**

This explains why Basohli painting remains so immediately recognizable.

Its greatest works possess an almost heraldic power.

XXVI. From Basohli to Guler and Kangra

During the eighteenth century, this world changed.

Painters associated with Guler, particularly the family of Pandit Seu and his sons **Manaku and Nainsukh**, introduced increasing observation of human behaviour and the natural world.

Nainsukh's art in particular transformed Pahari painting through extraordinary attention to individual physiognomy, gesture and lived experience.

The following generation increasingly integrated these discoveries into devotional and literary painting.

Eventually the transformation produced the lyrical naturalism associated with Kangra:

soft hills;

misty distances;

luxuriant forests;

elegant women;

delicate hands;

and a highly poetic relationship between human emotion and landscape.

The present painting occupies an important position relative to this transformation.

It knows the wider artistic world from which Guler naturalism emerged, but its deepest instincts remain older:

contour rather than modelling;
symbol rather than observation;
saturation rather than tonalism;
intensity rather than lyricism.

That is why **Basohli School** remains the appropriate headline attribution.

XXVII. Attributional conclusion

The painting's history is unusually instructive.

In 2017 Capitulum independently recognized it as **Basohli**, although dating it to the nineteenth century.

Hessink subsequently broadened the school to Pahari and retained a nineteenth-century date.

The present reassessment began from the object itself.

The unusually patterned water led to comparison with early western Pahari painting and Manaku.

The facial profile pointed strongly toward Basohli.

The schematic vegetation strengthened that conclusion.

The hills, hands, palette, demon and shallow conception of space independently supported it.

Comparison with Guler demonstrated that the painting lacks the increasingly naturalistic refinement of that school.

Comparison with Kangra made the distinction still clearer.

The rediscovery of the Capitoliium record then provided an important historical confirmation: **the Basohli attribution had already been made independently before the painting entered its present collection.**

The most defensible attribution is consequently:

Basohli School, Punjab Hills, c.1740–1760

The work participates in the broader **Basohli-Guler artistic continuum** of the mid-eighteenth century, which accounts for several features that do not conform rigidly to classic late-seventeenth-century Basohli painting.

There is presently insufficient evidence to attribute it to Manaku or to insert it into a particular known *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* manuscript.

XXVIII. Iconographic conclusion

On iconography, a little more caution is appropriate.

The earlier Matsya identification is supported by genuine western Pahari precedent. Christie's Basohli/Chamba Matsya of c.1710 demonstrates that the image of Vishnu fighting an aquatic demon belonged to the established regional repertoire.

Yet the present demon's extraordinary **conch body** finds unusually precise textual explanation in *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* X.45.

There the Ocean explicitly identifies Pañcajana as a demon who moves beneath the water **in conch form**; Krishna enters the sea and kills him; and the next verse describes Krishna taking the conch associated with the demon's body.

For that reason I would retain the Pañcajana identification as the **preferred interpretation**, while recording Matsya as the important historical alternative.

This leads to the final catalogue title:

Krishna-Vishnu Slaying Pañcajana and Obtaining the Pāñcajanya Conch

An illustration from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Book X, Chapter 45

Basohli School, Punjab Hills, c.1740–1760

with a scholarly note:

The deity incorporates aspects of established western Pahari Matsya-Vishnu iconography, which accounts for the painting's earlier identification as Matsyavatara. The conch-form body of the demon, however, corresponds particularly closely to the description of Pañcajana in Bhāgavata Purāṇa X.45.40–42