



THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

A STUDY IN INDIAN ART & MATERIAL CULTURE

THE CHANGING SKIN OF INDIAN PAINTING

Paper, Wasli and the Material Evolution of the Miniature, c.
1600–1850

The Eye of the Beholder is a Basel-based cultural-asset maison devoted to rare books, Indian miniature painting and works on paper - bringing together connoisseurship, provenance research, scholarship and collecting.

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THE CHANGING SKIN OF INDIAN PAINTING

Paper, Wasli and the Material Evolution of the Miniature, c. 1600–1850



A study of the changing material character of Indian painting supports - from fibrous handmade sheets and laminated wasli to the increasingly diverse paper economy of the nineteenth century.

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The Eye of the Beholder is a Basel-based private cultural-asset maison devoted to rare books, Indian miniature painting and works on paper. Its approach combines collecting with scholarship: provenance research, material examination, comparative connoisseurship and the recovery of the historical contexts in which objects were made, used and transmitted.

This monograph belongs to that larger project. Rather than treating paper as a passive background to Indian painting, it asks how fibre, pulp, lamination, sizing, burnishing, trade and changing availability shaped the physical character of the miniature itself.

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“There was no single material called wasli that remained unchanged for two and a half centuries. Wasli was principally a technological idea - a prepared painting support. The papers from which that support was made evolved continuously.”

A material history of Indian painting, c. 1600–1850

We tend to speak of the support of an Indian miniature with deceptive simplicity: opaque pigments and gold on wasli. The phrase is so familiar in auction catalogues, museum descriptions and books on Indian painting that it can create the impression that wasli was a standardized material—a particular kind of handmade paper on which generations of Mughal, Rajput and Pahari painters worked more or less unchanged from the seventeenth into the nineteenth century.

The physical evidence suggests something considerably more complicated.

Anyone who handles Indian paintings of different periods soon becomes aware that the paper itself has a history. A seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century sheet can feel quite unlike the support encountered beneath many paintings of the first half of the nineteenth century. Some early papers have a distinctly organic character: irregular thickness, visible or palpable fibres, soft and sometimes almost textile-like edges where exposed, variations in density and a surface whose extraordinary smoothness is evidently the result of preparation rather than manufacture alone. Some later sheets, by contrast, can feel more compact, homogeneous and mechanically convincing—thinner yet surprisingly strong, less fluffy at an exposed edge and sometimes much closer to what the modern hand instinctively recognises as “paper.”

This is not merely the consequence of ageing.

Recent scientific examination of Pahari papers, combined with historical accounts of Indian papermaking, makes it increasingly clear that the support of Indian painting should itself be regarded as an historical artefact. Between about 1600 and 1850, the economics of paper, sources of fibre, regional supply networks, quality of pulp, methods of sheet formation, recycling practices and availability of different grades all changed. The painter's wasli changed with them.

The result is a proposition worth making explicitly:

There was no single material called wasli that remained unchanged for two and a half centuries. Wasli was principally a technological idea—a prepared painting support. The papers from which that support was made evolved continuously.

That distinction helps explain why a Basohli or early Mughal painting and a Pahari painting of c. 1840 can both legitimately be described as being painted on prepared handmade paper or wasli while their substrates look and feel markedly different.

What was wasli?

The word itself offers a clue. Wasli is associated with the Persian vasl, conveying joining or union: sheets are brought together to create another material. In its classic form, several sheets of



handmade paper are adhered with a starch-based paste, pressed and dried, and the resulting support is carefully polished or burnished.

A surviving version of the traditional practice remains in contemporary miniature-painting training. Cotton-fibre sheets may be dampened and laminated with wheat-starch paste, pressed and dried, after which the surface is repeatedly burnished, traditionally with a shell or other very smooth object. The Morgan Library's account of the traditional technique used in Shahzia Sikander's training describes essentially this process: layered cotton-fibre sheets, wheat-starch paste, pressing, drying and shell burnishing.

But this immediately exposes the problem with treating wasli as a material category comparable to “linen” or “parchment.”

The final support has at least two separate histories.

The first is the history of the constituent paper: what plant or textile fibres supplied the pulp; how thoroughly they were retted, washed and beaten; how evenly the pulp was distributed; what mould formed the sheet; how it was sized; and whether it represented an expensive or inexpensive grade.

The second is the history of its preparation by or for the painter: whether sheets were laminated; how many; with what adhesive; whether the sheet was coated or sized again; how intensively it was burnished; whether it was coloured or tinted; and whether additional paper was subsequently attached as margins or backing.

Thus two sheets may both be “wasli” while possessing substantially different microscopic structures.

That becomes crucial when looking across centuries.

I. The Seventeenth Century: Paper as a Luxury Material

The Mughal atelier inherited a highly developed Persianate and Central Asian culture of paper. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, paper manufacture was already established in several parts of northern India, but high-quality paper remained a valuable manufactured commodity rather than the inexpensive, ubiquitous material that the modern word “paper” implies.

Sialkot became particularly celebrated.

The historical tradition places the development of papermaking in Kashmir in the fifteenth century and the migration of Kashmiri papermakers to Sialkot during Akbar's reign. Mills operated around Sialkot in places including Rangpur, Nakapura and Hirapura, benefiting from the water of the Aik river.

By Jahangir's reign, sources distinguish named grades of paper. Mān Singhī, Khasā-i Jahāngīrī and Nim Harīrī were associated with clean, white, high-quality sheets. Khasā-i Jahāngīrī was described as white, fine, clean, durable and well burnished; another variety, Shāh-Jahāngīrī, was thin, light and slightly bluish.

This is significant because it overturns another easy assumption: old handmade paper was not necessarily coarse paper.

Some seventeenth-century Indian papers were luxury products of astonishing refinement. Fine Mughal paper could be thin, dense, polished and extraordinarily smooth.

The difference from later industrial or semi-industrial paper lies not necessarily in visible roughness but in its internal structure and manufacture.

Traditional northern Indian papermaking relied extensively upon recycled fibrous materials. These could undergo repeated soaking or retting, washing, alkaline treatment and beating before being suspended as pulp. The sheet was formed on a mould whose flexible screen could be constructed from reeds or grasses connected with horsehair. Once dried, sheets could be starch-treated and stone-burnished.

Consequently the apparently flawless ivory surface of a Mughal miniature can conceal a remarkably organic interior.

And this is where the hand of the collector can occasionally perceive what photography cannot.

At an exposed corner, abrasion, wormhole or old loss, one may encounter fibres that appear relatively long and irregular. The internal paper can seem softer than its polished exterior suggests. The sheet sometimes has a subtle spring or cloth-like quality. Thickness may vary almost imperceptibly across its area.

The surface is smooth because craftsmen made it smooth.

That distinction matters enormously.

The exquisite surface of a seventeenth-century painting is therefore not necessarily evidence of an intrinsically uniform paper. It may instead represent the transformation of a fibrous handmade sheet through sizing, lamination, compression and burnishing.

Wasli was, in this sense, an engineered composite.

II. From Paper to Painting Surface

The painter required properties different from those demanded by a scribe.

Miniature painting involved extraordinarily fine brushwork, repeated applications of water-based colour, opaque mineral and organic pigments, detailed modelling, gold and sometimes repeated burnishing during the painting process. A very absorbent untreated paper would be poorly suited to this technique: liquid would penetrate rapidly and lines would feather.

The preparation of the support changed this behaviour.

Starch sizing partially filled the interstices between fibres. Lamination increased dimensional stability. Pressure compressed the structure. Burnishing flattened protruding fibres and dramatically reduced surface tooth.

The painter was effectively converting paper into something approaching a polished panel.

The extent of this transformation should not be underestimated. Conservation literature has noted that repeated burnishing affects not merely the paper but the adhesion of subsequent paint layers: an exceptionally smooth support provides less mechanical key for pigments.

This explains one of the paradoxes of miniature painting. A material originating as a network of vegetable fibres could ultimately carry lines of astonishing precision.

Yet the underlying network remained.

It is therefore useful to imagine early wasli not simply as “thick handmade paper,” but as a laminated, sized and compressed fibrous structure whose visible surface has been deliberately made to conceal much of the character of its constituent material.

That may explain the particular feel of many early paintings.

III. The Eighteenth Century: Regionalisation

After 1700, the material story becomes more complicated.

Mughal artistic culture dispersed. Artists, techniques and visual conventions moved between Delhi and regional courts. Painting flourished in Rajasthan and the Punjab Hills, while workshops developed their own traditions and responded to very different levels of patronage.

Paper followed the same decentralising pattern.

The support beneath an eighteenth-century Mewar painting should not automatically be assumed to be materially identical to that beneath a Guler drawing merely because both ultimately belonged to the broader Indian miniature tradition.

Papermaking itself was regional.

Sialkot supplied northern markets. Kashmir possessed its own tradition. Rajasthan had important centres including Sanganer. Named varieties and grades proliferated. At Jaipur, for example, traditions of highly polished court papers continued, including prized Sanganer products burnished to a glossy surface.

The important point is that paper existed within a hierarchy of qualities.

The finest grades might be reserved for manuscripts, religious texts, court documents or wealthy patrons. Cheaper sheets existed for commercial records and everyday writing.

Painting workshops purchased within this economy.

And here the modern scientific investigation of Pahari material becomes especially revealing.

IV. What Pahari Paper Actually Contains

In 2024, Amélie Couvrat Desvergnés and Agnieszka Helman-Ważny published a detailed scientific investigation of paper used for Pahari drawings and paintings preserved in the Wereldmuseum, Leiden. The collection comprises works originating in the Punjab Hills and dating broadly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Rather than assuming that “Sialkoti paper” meant a particular substance, the researchers examined the papers macroscopically and microscopically.

The findings are remarkable.

The papers averaged approximately 0.22 mm in thickness, but most showed uneven pulp distribution when examined with transmitted light. Only a very small proportion displayed a truly uniform formation. Surface examination revealed fibre bundles, bark fragments, particles and pieces of thread embedded within the sheets.

Microscopy went further.

Only 11 per cent of the sampled fibres were classified as good quality. Forty-three per cent were medium quality and 46 per cent poor. Many fibres were broken, swollen, heavily fibrillated or distorted, consistent with extensive previous use and prolonged processing. Ninety per cent of the samples contained mixtures of fibres of different lengths and conditions.

Most revealingly, the dominant raw material was not some hypothetical pristine “miniature-painting fibre.”

It was largely sunn hemp (*Crotalaria juncea*), accompanied by smaller quantities of kenaf and jute. Cotton also appeared substantially: it was identified in around 30 per cent of samples.

Some sheets even contain blue or red textile fibres visible within the paper. Microscopy confirmed blue-dyed bast fibres in some specimens.

Why?

Because paper belonged to a recycling economy.

Rope, matting, sacks, nets, cloth and other fibrous objects began life serving agriculture, transport or households. When too deteriorated for their original purpose, they could enter the papermaking chain. The fibre therefore had a biography before it became paper.

A rope could become a painting.

A worn textile could eventually carry Krishna.

That is one of the most beautiful material facts about Pahari painting.

V. The “Fluffy” Old Paper Problem

This scientific evidence helps refine the observation with which we began.

When an early Indian painting reveals a soft, somewhat fibrous interior at an exposed edge, it is tempting to attribute that character specifically to “old wasli.”

Sometimes that intuition will be directionally correct, but the mechanism is more complex.

The fibrous appearance may reflect several interacting factors:

long and heterogeneous plant fibres; recycled textile or cordage material; imperfect pulp refinement; uneven sheet formation; multiple laminated sheets; starch sizing; and the subsequent effects of two or three centuries of humidity, mechanical stress and adhesive deterioration.

Conversely, a beautifully burnished surface may disguise precisely this irregular interior.

The Heritage Science investigation found that the majority of examined Pahari papers had what the researchers describe as a cloudy appearance in transmitted light, caused by uneven pulp distribution. Raised bundles of fibres and other inclusions occur within the sheets.

This gives a physical explanation for the collector's impression that some early papers possess a soft, organic body beneath the painting.

But it produces a surprising qualification.

Pahari painters were not necessarily using the finest available Sialkoti paper.

Quite the opposite.

VI. Great Painting on Second-Grade Paper

Historical descriptions praise Jahangiri paper for its whiteness, fineness, strength and polish. Yet the papers scientifically examined from Pahari workshops frequently do not conform to that standard.

The researchers conclude that much of the paper available to Pahari artists was probably second- or third-grade material compared with the luxury papers manufactured in the Punjab plains.

Economics and geography offer obvious explanations.

Many hill states were small. Transport into Himalayan territories was difficult and expensive. Paper had to travel over challenging terrain using animals and human carriers. Court resources differed enormously from those of the Mughal imperial atelier.

Artists consequently treated paper economically. Sheets were filled rather than casually discarded. Drawings might occupy whatever useful area remained.

Yet the inferiority of the raw sheet did not prevent extraordinary painting.

Why?

Because the painter could transform the surface.

Opaque watercolour covered much of the substrate. Sizing controlled absorption. Burnishing compressed irregularities. Pigment and preparation concealed inclusions. The visual perfection of the painting therefore need not correspond to the intrinsic perfection of the paper.

This distinction between paper quality and painting-surface quality is essential.

A relatively mediocre sheet could become an excellent painting support.

VII. Around 1800: The Beginning of a Material Transition

It would be misleading to propose that Indian paper suddenly changed in 1800. There was no clean technological rupture.

But by the early nineteenth century the material environment surrounding painters was unquestionably changing.

The political economy of northern India was changing. Mughal patronage had fragmented. Sikh power expanded in Punjab. British political and commercial presence increased dramatically. Trade networks widened. European manufactured goods circulated more extensively. Paper existed in greater quantities and varieties.

Pahari painters themselves migrated and found new patrons. The political disruptions around the beginning of the nineteenth century did not terminate Pahari painting; artists continued working for hill rulers and increasingly for Sikh and other patrons.

The paper available to them therefore came from an increasingly heterogeneous marketplace.

Traditional handmade paper did not disappear. Sialkot remained an important manufacturing centre. Indeed, the evidence proves that very fine Indian paper was still being produced well into the nineteenth century.

An illuminated manuscript of *Kāmarūp* and *Kāmalatā* made in 1834–35, probably at Amritsar or Lahore, provides an instructive example. Its paper is described as light cream, evenly thick, strong, clean and containing very few impurities.

This is extremely important.

A sheet dating from the 1830s that looks “modern” does not necessarily have to be European or machine-made.

Indian papermakers themselves were capable of producing highly uniform, strong and refined sheets.

The collector therefore faces a more difficult question.

VIII. Why an 1840 Pahari Painting Can Feel Different

This brings us to the specific observation that prompted this enquiry.

Why might the substrate of a Pahari miniature painted around 1840 feel substantially stronger, denser, less porous and less fibrous than that of a painting from around 1700?

There is no single answer.

But there are several historically plausible ones.

First, the constituent paper may simply be of a different indigenous grade. Traditional mills produced multiple qualities. A nineteenth-century artist could obtain a relatively thin, well-beaten, strongly formed sheet radically different from a coarse eighteenth-century one.

Second, the pulp composition could differ. Sunn hemp, jute, kenaf and cotton waste were not present in fixed proportions. The scientific evidence demonstrates mixtures rather than a single formula. Different fibre combinations produce different mechanical properties.

Third, processing could differ. Duration of retting, degree of beating, alkalinity, washing and pulp concentration all alter the resulting paper. More refined pulp generally produces a more consolidated sheet.

Fourth, lamination need not be identical. A painter working with a sufficiently strong sheet might require less substantial lamination than one working with weak or highly absorbent paper.

Fifth, sizing and burnishing could create dramatically different tactile results. Two superficially similar sheets can react differently to moisture and touch because of their preparation.

Sixth, and increasingly importantly as the nineteenth century progressed, imported European paper entered the Indian material world. Some artists and workshops unquestionably encountered European sheets, particularly in contexts connected with British patrons and the broad phenomenon conventionally called Company painting.

Thus the nineteenth-century painting support becomes a hybrid field in which indigenous handmade papers, superior and inferior local grades, imported papers and different workshop preparation methods could coexist.

There is no reason to expect a Pahari painting of 1840 to have precisely the same physical substrate as one of 1700.

Indeed, it would be surprising if it did.

IX. Wasli Became a Technique More Than a Paper

The distinction can now be sharpened.

If we call every prepared miniature support “wasli,” then the word describes what the artist did to the paper more reliably than what the papermaker originally made.

This is analogous to gesso in European painting. A Renaissance panel and a nineteenth-century panel can both carry a prepared ground while the wood beneath them differs completely.

Likewise, the seventeenth-century Mughal artist and nineteenth-century Pahari painter could both work upon a laminated or otherwise prepared and burnished support while the constituent sheets differed in fibre, thickness, formation and manufacture.

That is why the catalogue formula “gouache on wasli” can conceal more information than it reveals.

Ideally, material descriptions would distinguish:

handmade paper, laminated and burnished;

single-sheet handmade paper, sized and burnished;

indigenous laid paper;

European laid paper;

European wove paper;

or simply paper, preparation undetermined,

when the evidence allows.

The blanket term “wasli” should not substitute for physical examination.

X. The Nineteenth-Century Paradox

The most interesting conclusion is actually a paradox.

One might expect paper history to represent straightforward technological progress:

1600: coarse handmade paper → 1700: improved handmade paper → 1800: superior paper → 1850: modern paper.

The evidence does not support such a sequence.

Excellent paper existed in Jahangir's time.

Poor paper existed in the eighteenth century.

Poor paper continued into the nineteenth.

Exceptionally fine Indian handmade paper was still being manufactured in the 1830s and later.

At the same time, imported European papers increasingly circulated.

The transition is therefore not principally from bad paper to good paper.

It is from a relatively bounded artisanal paper economy to an increasingly diverse paper economy.

By 1840 an artist potentially inhabited a world containing a greater range of supports than his predecessor of 1640.

That increased diversity is probably what collectors are feeling when comparing nineteenth-century paintings with much earlier ones.

XI. Burnishing: The Great Disguise

No discussion of Indian painting paper is complete without returning to burnishing.

Burnishing makes chronological judgement from surface texture dangerous.

Traditional Indian sheets were commonly starch-treated and polished even before reaching painters. The Sialkot process itself involved drying, starch coating and stone burnishing.

The artist could then prepare and polish the painting support further.

Burnishing compresses fibres into the plane of the sheet, reduces surface irregularity, increases apparent density and gloss, and modifies absorption. A rough fibrous sheet can consequently acquire an almost enamel-like painting surface.

Repeated burnishing during painting can further alter it.

This means that what appears visually to be a fine compact paper may prove, at a damaged edge or under magnification, to contain heterogeneous pulp and large fibre bundles.

The Leiden Pahari material demonstrates precisely this discrepancy: macroscopic surfaces that carried sophisticated paintings contained remarkably heterogeneous fibres, bark particles, coloured textile fragments and severely processed recycled material.

The surface lies.

Or rather, the surface records the painter's intervention while the torn edge records the papermaker's.

For attribution and dating, both need to be read.

XII. Can Paper Help Date a Pahari Painting?

Yes—but with considerable caution.

Paper should rarely determine a date by itself. Nevertheless, it can provide powerful corroborative evidence.

For a painting attributed to c. 1680–1720, one might examine whether the support possesses the irregular formation, fibrous structure, handmade mould characteristics, sizing and lamination expected of an early indigenous sheet.

For something attributed to c. 1830–50, a noticeably more uniform and compact paper should not automatically create suspicion. It may actually be perfectly consistent with nineteenth-century material culture.

Conversely, the presence of an identifiable European watermark can establish an invaluable terminus post quem. Chain lines, laid lines and eventually wove-paper structures can help identify manufacturing traditions.

The examination should therefore proceed from the outside inward:

- surface gloss
- surface fibre
- colour
- thickness
- stiffness
- edge structure
- number of laminated layers
- laid and chain lines in transmitted light
- sheet formation
- watermarks
- visible inclusions
- and, where scientifically justified, microscopic fibre analysis

The 2024 Pahari study demonstrates just how much information such analysis can reveal. It recorded morphology, thickness, texture, colour, fibre distribution, mould impressions, manufacturing traces and impurities before undertaking microscopic identification.

Paper deserves to become part of connoisseurship rather than merely part of conservation.

XIII. A Collector's Chronology of the Indian Painting Support

With all the necessary qualifications, one can propose a useful working model.

c. 1600–1650

High-quality Mughal painting operates within a sophisticated luxury-paper culture inherited from Persianate and Central Asian traditions. Handmade rag and plant-fibre papers are carefully processed, sized and polished. Elite papers can already be remarkably thin, white, strong and smooth. Wasli construction creates highly stable supports for imperial painting.

c. 1650–1720

The technique spreads and regionalises. Paper remains expensive and handmade. Supports can show pronounced internal fibre structure despite highly finished surfaces. Multiple grades circulate. The distinction between the raw sheet and the artist's prepared surface remains considerable.

c. 1720–1800

Regional painting centres flourish. Paper supply becomes increasingly localised and economically differentiated. Rajasthan, Punjab and other regions draw upon different papermaking centres. In the Punjab Hills, painters frequently employ relatively inexpensive Sialkoti papers made from recycled sunn hemp and other utilitarian fibres. Lamination, sizing, pigment and burnishing compensate for irregular raw material.

c. 1800–1825

Political and commercial networks shift. Traditional papers continue, but the range of available material broadens. Artists migrate between courts and patronage systems. Sikh Punjab and expanding British influence alter trade patterns without immediately eliminating indigenous production.

c. 1825–1850

The material world becomes notably heterogeneous. Fine indigenous handmade paper continues to be manufactured—as the 1834–35 Kāmarūp and Kāmalatā manuscript demonstrates—alongside ordinary regional paper and increasingly available imported material. Some painting supports consequently appear thinner, stronger, more homogeneous and less visibly fibrous than earlier examples. Traditional sizing and burnishing continue even when the underlying sheet has changed.

This is not an absolute dating table.

It is a model of increasing material diversity.

XIV. What the Hand Can Tell Us

There is a tendency in art history to distrust tactile connoisseurship because it appears subjective.

That caution is justified: paintings should not be unnecessarily handled, and touch can never replace scientific analysis.

Yet experienced collectors, conservators and dealers repeatedly notice physical characteristics before science explains them.

The perception that an early sheet feels different from an 1840 sheet is therefore worth taking seriously.

The mistake would be to translate that observation immediately into:

old = wasli; late = ordinary paper.

A more defensible formulation is:

early and late paintings may both employ the wasli tradition, but the constituent papers and degree of preparation changed. By the nineteenth century, painters operated within a broader and more heterogeneous paper economy, so the physical character of the support can differ substantially from that encountered in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century paintings.

The scientific evidence now strongly supports the second proposition.

XV. The Painting Beneath the Painting

Indian miniature scholarship has traditionally concentrated on what lies upon the paper: drawing, pigment, iconography, inscriptions and style.

But another historical document lies underneath them.

A fibre of sunn hemp may once have been part of a rope.

A blue strand embedded in a Krishna drawing may once have belonged to a dyed textile.

A coarse piece of sacking could pass through years of domestic use, retting, beating and pulping before becoming the support for a court artist.

The sheet might then be pasted to another sheet, coated with starch, compressed and burnished until the rough history of its fibres disappeared beneath a luminous surface.

On that surface an artist painted an eye perhaps two millimetres long.

Two centuries later the painting is catalogued simply:

Opaque pigments and gold on paper.

The description is technically correct and historically inadequate.

Paper was not a passive carrier of Indian painting. It was a manufactured object embedded in agriculture, textile production, trade, court patronage, geography and recycling. Its transformation between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries parallels the transformation of Indian painting itself—from the concentrated luxury production of imperial ateliers through the extraordinary regional cultures of Rajasthan and the Punjab Hills into the more heterogeneous artistic economy of nineteenth-century India.

And this explains the collector's original observation.

The substrate really did change.

Not because craftsmen suddenly abandoned an immutable substance called wasli, but because wasli had never been immutable in the first place.

It was a process applied to whatever suitable paper the artist's world could provide.

In 1650 that world offered one spectrum of papers. In 1750 it offered another. By 1840 it offered another again—traditional Sialkoti sheets of multiple grades, exceptionally refined indigenous papers, recycled-fibre papers, regional products and, increasingly, imported European materials.

The hand feels that history.

A seventeenth-century miniature may reveal, beneath its polished skin, the soft irregular architecture of an artisanal fibrous sheet. An eighteenth-century Pahari drawing may expose clumps of sunn hemp, fragments of old cordage or coloured textile fibres. An 1830s or 1840s painting may rest on paper that is cleaner, more evenly formed, thinner and surprisingly strong.

All can belong authentically to the Indian miniature tradition.

The mistake is expecting their paper to be the same.



THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Wasli is therefore best understood not as the timeless paper of Indian miniature painting, but as a changing technology of the painting surface—one whose two-and-a-half-century evolution is preserved, quite literally, beneath the colours.

A NOTE ON METHOD

This essay treats paper as evidence. It draws attention to the distinction between the constituent sheet and the prepared painting surface, and to the danger of assuming that the word “wasli” identifies a single immutable material.

For collectors and scholars, the practical implication is simple: surface, edge, fibre, lamination, laid and chain lines, inclusions, watermarks and transmitted-light formation should be read together. Material examination should corroborate - not replace - stylistic, documentary and provenance evidence.

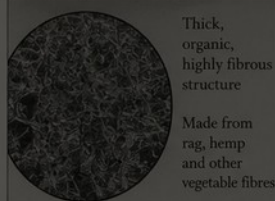
Prepared as a scholarly monograph by The Eye of the Beholder, Basel, Switzerland.

The Changing Skin of Indian Painting

EVOLUTION OF PAPER AND WASLI IN INDIAN MINIATURE PAINTING, c. 1600–1850

Wasli is not a single material but a prepared support—paper (one or more sheets) laminated, sized, and burnished by the artist to create a smooth surface for painting. The papers used changed over time.

c. 1600–1650
Early Mughal Period

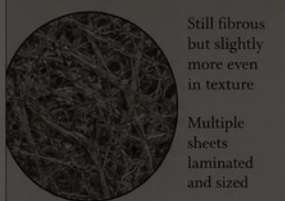


Thick, organic, highly fibrous structure

Made from rag, hemp and other vegetable fibres

Heavily burnished surface

c. 1650–1720
Late Mughal / Early Rajput



Still fibrous but slightly more even in texture

Multiple sheets laminated and sized

Burnished to a smooth, absorbent surface

c. 1720–1800
Pahari / Regional Schools

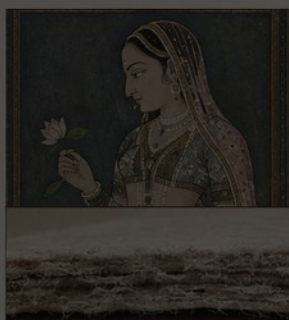


Mixed and recycled fibres; visible inclusions

Sunn hemp, jute, cotton waste, old textiles

Often second- or third-grade paper

c. 1800–1825
Transition Period

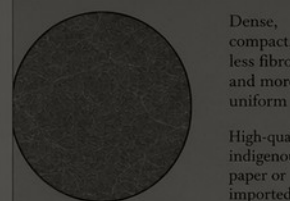


Fibre more evenly distributed; fewer impurities

Better pulp refinement, stronger sheets

Thinner and more uniform paper

c. 1825–1850
Early Colonial Period



Dense, compact, less fibrous and more uniform

High-quality indigenous paper or imported European paper

Smooth, strong and less absorbent

THE MAKING OF WASLI



KEY POINTS

- Wasli is a prepared support, not a specific paper.
- Papers varied by region, time, quality and availability.
- Many Pahari paintings were done on recycled, second-grade papers.
- By the 19th century, paper choices became more diverse, including high-quality indigenous papers and imported European papers.



Beneath every line and colour lies a history of fibres, craft, trade and



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