

# Assessing the Reflection of *Vasant* (Spring) in the Paintings of Waswo X. Waswo

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## Abstract

India has a rich diversified nature and rhythmic cycle of seasons. The queen of seasons, the season of *Vasant* is accredited for pleasant climatic conditions and for natural inhabitants to rejuvenate and intertwine with each other. It has a unique feature of enticing excursionists across the world to rejoice in its natural beauty. India has had a close affinity for artists coming from across the world for ages. Besotted by the natural beauty of India, many artists in the past and the present have been visiting and staying back. Artist Waswo X. Waswo was captivated by the culture, nature, and art of India. Mountains, hills, the cycle of seasons, diversified culture, Indian miniature art; and rich flora and fauna did inspire the artist and eventually were reflected in his artworks.

This paper seeks to analyze paintings of the artist Waswo X. Waswo which reflects the season, spring (*Vasant Ritu*), considered the most endearing theme portrayed in Indian miniature tradition. The essence of *Vasant* as an allegory of renewal, rejoicing, rejuvenation, hope, and joy will be examined in his paintings. The artist's compositions are studied and analyzed considering visual narratives, symbolic significance, and other aspects of presentation.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics; *Karkhana*; Miniature Paintings; *Vasant*.

## Introduction

India is a country acknowledged for its richness of culture, tradition, and climate which are reflected in the distinct art forms. Such a blend of natural beauty, history, and aesthetics has been featured in Indian art, which has its symbolic roots in the *Chitrastotra* of *Vishnudharmottara Purana* which elaborates on the ways the elemental representation should be cre-

ated (Shah). Following the set traditions, Indian miniatures also continue to form the paintings with such aesthetics and characters where the theme often represented is *Rituchitra* (seasons). Other than seasons, further themes depicted were the portraits and lifestyle of the royals, Indian landscapes with an abundance of natural flora and fauna, and the artists' inspirations and devotions (Mitter).

The amalgam of varied cultures, seasons, beliefs, and philosophies interests visitors across the world to look at India. Many artists of foreign origin like Tilly Kettle, William Daniell, Nicholas Roerich, Olinto Ghilardi, Cecil Burns, Walter Langhammer, and many more have traveled to Indian places for artistic vision (Singh). Some of the artists were so influenced by Indian art and culture that they eventually started working with miniature features and contributing to the Indian miniature art tradition. Russian artist Nicholas Roerich's visual narratives portray an application of Indian miniature aspects (Saini and Gupta). Moving further, artist Waswo X. Waswo who hails from America, visited India many times and learned about the rich art, heritage, and culture then finally settled here for his artistic endeavor of miniatures and other art practices.

Indian miniature painting tradition is rooted in diverse geographical locations belonging to a different period in history. Intricate details, the use of wasli paper, a blend of bold and vivid colors, exquisite borders, and engaging documentary subjects are some characteristics that define miniature paintings. Apart from these, paintings portraying aspects of Indian seasons are considered the most recognizable theme that fascinated Indian and foreign connoisseurs. In particular, the charismatic nature of the spring season has been a matter of discourse for ages and even now in art. Artist Waswo draws inspiration from the style of Mughal miniatures (Lahoti and Mathur). Looking his autobiographical paintings, where he has portrayed himself in rich natural settings, are suggestive of the concept of Mughal courtly narratives like those of *Baburnama* and *Akbarnama*, to create elaborate paintings that connect him with cultural notations and self-creation narratives. Likewise here in this paper, the contemporary artist Waswo X. Waswo's autobiographical miniature paintings manifest the season *Vasant*, which is known as one of the major seasons of India. Through his paintings, Waswo creates vibrant representations of *Vasant* while he combines seasonal elements with the delicate traditional artwork of miniature painting.

The examination of Waswo's visual storytelling in works explores thematic elements along with symbolic values, color choices, miniature ar-

tistic techniques, and cultural and imaginative factors that influence his spring time depiction. According to Rajendra Prasad, academician and traditional master artist of wash technique noted that the symbolic representation in Indian miniatures is mindfully spirited in Waswo's works wherein the resurgence of greenery, flowers and animals promotes spring activity. Waswo X. Waswo, an eminent artist from the U.S.A. has lived and traveled in India for more than 20 years and at last made his home in Udaipur, the lake city of Rajasthan and established his art atelier, which the artist has termed as *karkhana*. The word *karkhana* is reminiscent of the Indian Mughal miniature time where several artists worked under a roof depending on their skills. Recollecting past Indian miniature practices of the *karkhana* system, artist Waswo collaborates with the miniature artist R. Vijay and others to execute his concepts and transform his sketches into meaningful miniature paintings (Ramdev). The paintings of the American artist are infused with his experiences and observations of geographical appearances during his journey to India. His creations are a reflection of ancient Indian miniature tradition filled with contemporary elements with an array of embellishments of *vasant* time.

Depiction of Vasant in the Miniature Paintings of Waswo X. Waswo



**Fig. 1 'A Dream in Bundi', series, stone pigment on wasli**

**Source (Waswo)**

Waswo's painting (Fig.1) from the series 'A Dream in Bundi' is painted with visual narratives and symbols that imbibe the *Vasant* season. The experience of scale and perspective widens the area of the landscape, and the minute intricate detailing of each element turns to the evocation of the *vasant* as the idealized time among all the other Indian seasons. The portrayal of balance and harmony emerged through the ecologies featuring spring. The washes of scarlet, yellow, and highly burnished pigment of blue harmonize with the rosy sky which heightens the enchanting joyous *bhava* of the spring season.

According to the eminent art historian Shailendra Kushwaha, the Indian aesthetic theory of

*alankara*, means ornamentation, is feasible and perceived in the painting. The representation of

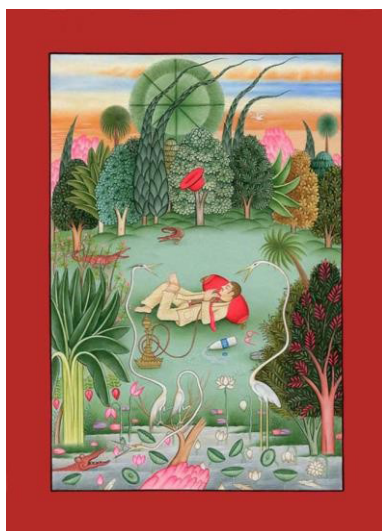
*alankara* manifests through trees decorated with golden blossoms, flowing hills, and rhythmic vegetation alongside the connecting vegetation and birds that exceed painting border limits symbolizing the endless energy of *vasant*. In addition, the excitement and happiness of the season are illustrated by the appearance of new leaves and the growth of new buds and shoots. Also, the moisture in the air is being refreshed with the luminosity of green color along with the amalgam of varied colors, which surely signifies the idea of celebrating spring.

Further, birds and animals' love of this season is indicated through the depiction of rich flora and fauna like deer, peacocks, cranes, bulls, pigeons, and parrots. Besides this, the whole composition is carpeted with greenery with the butterflies hovering over the flowers, enhancing the atmospheric beauty that remained identified as the spring time. On the far left corner, the expanding water body with swan couples and birds nearby gives special attention to the joyous nature of the season (Chakraverty 26-27). There is a hint of bringing the surreal concept to reality by portraying the buffalos, highlighting the cattle-rearing activity prevailing in the city of Bundi. This way, Waswo artist is trying to convert his dreams into reality.

Looking at the composition closely, it is observed that the main theme is the endowments of nature and for that reason minimalistic presence of humans is shown. In the center, artist showcased himself as a foreigner wearing round glasses, a hat, and a coat with a red tie which is the artist's true identity and is seen repeatedly in his creations. He seems stationed on a cliff, rejoicing and in tune with nature, looking deeply at the beauty of a butterfly seated on the tip of his finger using a magnifying glass. All the aspects reflect the delightful feeling of the vibrant spring during his stay in the landscape of India captured through his eyes. Moving further, the other figures shown are richly attired Rajput kings who appear to be of medieval time and the other person is typically dressed in early time. They also strive to perceive the prosperity that is bestowed upon each individual as a part of the landscape. These are the artist's creativity of adding elements that appear to unveil different times. All three are in tune with the beauty of nature. It is his style of representing inhabitants and nature that live in harmony on the mother earth. Likewise, he is also trying to bring to the notice of spectators that since ancient times, men strolled in the forest to cleanse their negativity and find peace. In the contemporary period, there is a quest of men to leave worldly things for silence manifested through compositional stature.

In addition, the artist's great use of aesthetical theories like those of *dhvani*

which stands for the covert delivery of emotional expressions and hidden ideas that extend beyond written meaning at a level higher than abstract meaning and concealed significance to generate aesthetic experiences in audiences, suggestive meaning (Sastri 89–91) intensified the breeding attitude during the season. Through the appearance of cohabitantes like a peacock and a deer, Waswo strengthens the *shringara rasa* which remained an identification of spring (Shanker et al). In the early Indian tradition of miniature painting, it is seen that the depiction of peacocks brings forth the idea of capturing romance and prosperity as synonyms for spring. The deer too are allegorical of unraveling desire for love which is delighted in this painting.



**Fig. 2 'A Dream in Bundi' series, stone pigment on wasli**

**Source (A Dream in Bundi Series)**

Waswo's painting (Fig.2) engrossed in the fresh array of *Vasant* season. Colors like tints of pink, yellow, blue, and green have been applied in a way that adds a refreshing appearance to the composition which corresponds to the spring period. Features like water bodies, lotuses, and flowering bushes are associated with *Vasanta* in Rajput miniature painting (Coomaraswamy 17– 18), referring to which artist too portrayed the season with the landscape having flowering trees, lotus buds, and petals in the water body, with cranes and crocodiles around, a reflection of favorable weather conditions for all animals to come out and allure the

exquisite warmth and beauty of nature during this period, which is native to the land of Bundi, depicting his sensitivity and understanding of the surrounding he is in at the current time. Rather than sticking to the conventional style, he created flora and fauna in a creative way like banana, palm, and mango trees having dense branches and other varieties of greenery covering the vast belt in the background all accentuating the season spring further to provide its mood, specifically, the endless blissful outlook of spring wherein the artist tried to inflict joyous emotion by adding his creativity using palmette of fan-shaped trees, and trees having long swirling lines; resulting in quantifying the aesthetics of the painting. In traditional Indian miniature paintings, Nayak and Nayika are often depicted enjoying each other's company, whereas the artist showcased himself as Nayak alone relishing his own company and in a relationship with nature to show the need of today's time. Reviewing the foreground, it is seen that the stages of lotuses are focused; some are buds, few are blooming and certain are fully bloomed which bring forth the iconic beginning of spring to start a new journey leading to ecstasy.

The artist purposely used a red border, which is typical of the Indian miniature tradition, but the scale and perspective of the painting widen the stretch of greenery in the composition intensify the essence of spring. The spectator also becomes part of spring as he feels the gentle breeze and the feel of fresh air through the undulating, rhythmic lines used in every element of the painting. The portrayal of artist is quite noticeable as he has depicted with his regular signature elements like a coat, red tie, round specks, and hat. This adds suggestive meaning to how a foreigner captured Indian natural beauty during his stay in the country. It also gains viewers' attention because of the placement in the center.

Here too, the idea of joy is refocused through the surreal effect created by the artist wherein the artist's relaxing figure lying on the grass bed smoking *hookah*, the cap is in the air as if stagnant at the movement, heightening the *harsa bhava*, the aesthetics of spring season. Here, in the painting, every illustrative element alleviates the meaning of the season except for the water bottle which is a symbol of something destructive. The degradation of natural soil and disturbance of the seasonal cycle due to the use of plastic is highlighted in the painting. This shows that paintings are a new medium to give a message to the spectators and not just to relish things.



**Fig.3 The Moon of Dreams, 2019, stone pigment on wasli**

**Source (Waswo)**

Another painting of Waswo (fig 3) captures the beauty of nature during the night in the season of *Vasant*. The painting titled 'The Moon of Dreams' portrays the exquisiteness of the full moon which enlightens the illustrative elements in the composition references to the spring time as per the Indian lunar calendar system, which is well defined by Bharat Muni in his *Natyashastra* how *shringara rasa* is best expressed in the light of the full moon of spring in chapter 6-7, (Muni). In this painting, the brightly lit leaves, flowering plants, and the curvilinear lines of the mountains in the background draw the attention of onlookers to the spring season intensifying the emotions of hope and joy. Looking at other details, it is clear that the artist has showcased unique trees that are differentiated through their shape, patterns, and color. This resembles the *Vasant* season where every natural element is rich and exclusive on its own.

Focusing on other constituents in the painting, varied ecologies like monkeys, fishes, deer, and cranes are considered additional factors uplifting the atmosphere of *Vasant* season. They all seem to be relishing the serene surroundings and highlighting the love of nature relished by all. Evaluating the compositional frame, it is pointed out that the far-stretched beauty of spring is prioritized through the foreground, to the far left where plants have uprooted through a piece of rock. More to it, the hill range is fully submerged in grass in the middle, and an unusual, stylized



formation of hills, sky, and cranes in the background. Also, looking at distance will not blur the lushness but getting greener and greener justifies how strongly the artist tried to show the full-fledged vegetation. This intensifies the *rati sthayi bhava*, synonymous with springtime. Though it is nighttime, the flowering plants still have distinctive leaf patterns, twigs, and buds that cannot be ignored, as these are reminiscent of new species active at this time of the year.

Like other paintings, here also Waswo depicted himself with his identification of a hat, coat, red tie, and water bottle. He is shown sleeping on the grass bed, relishing every aspect of spring night and living the most of it. The rich multiplicity of animals like elephants, leopards, Indian antelope, and spotted deer all within the border strengthens to unlock the laden visuals of the season. The bold frame of the painting creates an immediate impression in the minds of *Rasika* to uplift the spring mood. This painting features the foreigner's experiences of the spring season while he journeys through Indian landscapes and reflects his observations on the autobiographical miniature paintings.

### **Conclusion**

Artist Waswo has represented his experiences and observations while journeying through the Indian landscapes and communicating them through his miniature paintings. The paintings show that he has manifested the *Vasant* season through visual narratives, elements, principles of art, characteristics, and symbols. There is a significant role in the impeccable seasonal cycle of India in the context of Waswo's paintings. Each season is marked with newness and rejuvenating human emotions but the artist preferred spring over any other season which is owing to his love for nature. In addition, prolonged winters and adverse climatic conditions of his country made him capture scenic beauty during the spring during his artistic voyage to India. Further, through the paintings, Waswo is trying to highlight the true meaning of life, peace embedded in natural beauty. The paintings are his sensorial visualization of the environmental experience of nature in the *Vasant* season and presenting it in a new outlook of miniature painting. The fusion of his imagination and lived moments can be seen in his works. With his paintings, onlookers can feel the emotions of love, joy, rejuvenation, hope, and rejoicing during the spring season. Waswo's works are a reflection of his moods, memories, Indian culture, place, and time. In addition, they are a true glimpse of the acceptance of an outsider's representation in Indian society wherein the artist portrayed himself attired in identical foreigner clothes with a fedora hat, off-white suit, and red tie.

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