

The festival of Holi

हाथी
haathi
elephant

पानी
pani
water

रंग
rang
colour

Maharao Ram Singh II ruled the kingdom of Kota from 1827–1866.¹ He was the fifteenth Maharao of Kotah, which was established in 1624 and is now part of the modern Indian state of Rajasthan.² The painting depicts the Maharao celebrating the festival of Holi with his courtiers and servants.

The spring festival of Holi is one of the four most important occasions in the Hindu calendar, and is associated with the Hindu god Krishna. It is held at the full moon of the lunar month of Phalguna, which equates with February/March in the solar Gregorian calendar.³ As a spring festival Holi rejoices in ripening crops, fresh foliage and flowers, and the youthful energy and exuberance associated with Krishna.

Although Holi is a Hindu festival it is enjoyed, or 'played' as it is described in India, by all, without distinction of caste, creed or sex and provides an opportunity for the community to come together without the usual social constraints. On the morning of the second day of the festival participants play Holi by throwing coloured powder, squirting coloured water or dunking people in tubs of dye.⁴ The atmosphere is chaotic and gleeful, as friends, family and strangers celebrate together, their hair, skin and white festival attire gradually becoming completely saturated in colour as the morning wears on.

The Maharao, seated on the biggest elephant, is also the largest figure in the painting, and as befits his status as divine ruler he has a green and gold nimbus or halo, a parasol, and servants brandishing *chauri* or flywhisks made from horsehair. The Maharao is enthusiastically hosing a group of court women with the palace fire engine, which is energetically pumped by a group of servants. Note the servant holding up the hose with a forked stick. In the foreground a group of servants siphon water from animal skins carried by bullocks, possibly to refill the water pump.

Maharao Ram Singh II was an enthusiastic participant in Holi and commissioned many paintings of court festivities. These paintings served to document the daily life and personalities of the Kota court and were superseded by photographs. To enhance its value as a visual record, this painting has inscriptions on the elephants' saddle cloths (*jhool*) written in *devanagari* script, which identify the participants. The reverse of the painting also has an inscription identifying the Maharao and dating the painting to 1901, according to the Indian Samvat calendar, which equates to 1844 in the Gregorian calendar.

This vibrant and entertaining painting is an excellent example of the style known as *tamasha* painting that blossomed in Rajputana in the eighteenth century. *Tamasha* means 'show, important occasion or commotion' and *tamasha* subjects include festivals and performances, hunting scenes and leisure pursuits ranging from elephant fights to bathing. At their best, *tamasha* paintings provide a vivid window into a splendid and vanished world, combining precision and *brio*.

Kisan DAS
Indian active 1840s
Maharao Ram Singh II of Kotah and companions playing Holi on elephants in a street
1844, Kota, India
opaque watercolour and gold paint on paper
48.7 x 66.8 cm (image)
Felton Bequest, 1980 (AS51-1980)

- ¹ The title of maharao and the variations maharana and maharaja were used for hereditary rulers of Rajputana (Rajasthan). Different Rajput kingdoms used different titles, and Maharao was used in Kota and neighbouring Bundi.
- ² At Partition and the formation of the modern nations of India and Pakistan in 1947, twenty-two princely kingdoms, including the Hindu kingdom of Kota, were integrated to form Rajasthan. The spelling 'Kota' indicates the district and town, and 'Kotah' is used for the name of the royal family.
- ³ The Vikram Samvat calendar is popularly used in India. It is a lunar calendar with twelve months and is approximately fifty-seven years ahead of the Gregorian calendar used in most of the West. Thus the date 2068 in the Vikram Samvat calendar equates to the date 2011 in the Gregorian calendar.
- ⁴ In the nineteenth century, at the time of the painting, the powdered colours, known as *gulal* and *abir*, were made from talc or flour mixed with colours extracted from plants, including *aparajita*, a type of pea flower that yields purple and blue colours; marigolds and turmeric which provide yellow and red; and hibiscus flowers which produce violet and red. Today, both natural and synthetic colours are used.

