

CUET · FINE ARTS · CLASS XII · CODE 312

# The Manuscript Painting Tradition

CUET unit: The Manuscript Painting Tradition (Western Indian, Jain, Sultanate, Pala schools)

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## Snapshot

- The Chitrasutra (third Khanda of the Vishnudharmottara Purana, 5th century CE) is the foundational source-book of Indian painting canons.
- Manuscript illustrations are pictorial translations of poetic/canonical verses, kept as loose folios in thematic sets, distinct from wall murals.
- The three earliest manuscript-painting traditions are the Western Indian / Jain School, the Sultanate School, and the Pala School.
- This is critical for CUET as the chronological starting point of Indian miniature painting; it frequently yields direct factual MCQs on texts, patrons, centres and stylistic features.
- Key technical vocabulary — colophon, patli, bhandar, shaastradaan, kalpasutra — recurs in every subsequent Class XII chapter.
- Bridges the Ajanta wall-painting horizon of Class XI with the Mughal-Rajput-Pahari miniature horizon of Class XII.

## Detailed Notes

### 2.1 Core concepts

NCERT Class XII opens with a foundational text-based claim: the **Chitrasutra**, a chapter of the third Khanda of the **Vishnudharmottara Purana** (5th century CE), is regarded as the source-book of Indian painting and lays down the **pratima lakshana** — the canonical principles of image-making (NCERT §1, p. 1). This text is the philosophical anchor of the entire Indian miniature tradition and is a single-line CUET factual favourite. The **Chitrasutra** enumerates six limbs or **angas** of painting: **roopbheda** (looks and appearance), **pramana** (measurement, proportion and structure), **bhava** (expression of feeling), **lavanya yojana** (aesthetic composition), **sadrishya** (resemblance) and **varnikabhanga** (use of brush and colours). Together these six categories cover form, proportion, mood, beauty, likeness and technique — the full vocabulary of evaluation that examiners and connoisseurs would apply to any painting from the medieval period onwards.

NCERT then defines its key technical category. Medieval paintings are generically called miniature paintings because of their small size; they were intended to be hand-held and viewed closely, in contrast with the wall murals of the Ajanta tradition. Manuscript illustrations are a particular subset of miniature painting: they are pictorial translations

of verses from epics, canonical religious texts, literary classics, bardic compositions and music treatises. The accompanying text was written on the topmost portion of the folio in a demarcated box, or on the reverse of the same leaf (NCERT §1, p. 1). Manuscripts were issued as themed sets — the **Ramayana**, the **Bhagavata Purana**, the **Mahabharata**, the **Gita Govinda**, the **Ragamala** — and each set was wrapped in cloth and stored as a bundle in the patron's library (NCERT §1, p. 2).

The single most important folio in any manuscript set is the colophon page, which records the patron, the artist or scribe, the date and the place of commission or completion. The colophon is the principal art-historical evidence by which we date and locate a manuscript today, and it is therefore a perennial CUET factual MCQ topic. NCERT also notes that paintings travelled across regions as dowry gifts, royal exchanges and through the agency of pilgrims, monks and traders; this explains why a manuscript stylistically attributable to Mewar may today be held in a Bundi royal library, and vice versa.

The Western Indian School of Painting is the earliest of the three traditions. It thrived in Gujarat (its principal centre), in southern Rajasthan and in western Central India. The wealth flowing through Gujarat's ports enriched a class of merchants, traders and chieftains who became active patrons. Because this merchant class was largely Jain by faith, the Jain-themed portion of the Western Indian School is identified as the Jain School of Painting — not a separate school, but a sub-tradition defined by its religious subject matter (NCERT §1.1, p. 3). The Jain community's distinctive practice of **shaastradaan** — the donation of illustrated books — was glorified as a charitable act and a means of accumulating spiritual merit; manuscripts so donated were stored in monastery libraries called **bhandars**, which today preserve the bulk of surviving Jain manuscripts.

The most widely illustrated canonical Jain text is the **Kalpasutra**, which narrates the lives of the twenty-four Tirthankaras and emphasises five key biographical incidents for each: conception, birth, renunciation, enlightenment combined with the first sermon, and salvation (NCERT §1.1, p. 3). The dream sequence at Mahavir's conception is a recurring iconographic theme: his mother Trishala dreams of fourteen objects — an elephant, a bull, a tiger, the goddess Shri, a kalash, a palanquin, a pond, a rivulet, fire, banners, garlands, a heap of jewels, the Sun and the moon (NCERT §1.1, p. 4 side note). Other illustrated Jain texts include the **Kalakacharyakatha** (the story of Acharya Kalaka, who rescues his abducted nun sister from a Shaka king with the aid of a magical donkey), the **Sangrahini Sutra** (a twelfth-century cosmological text describing the structure of the universe) and the **Uttaradhyana Sutra** (the teachings of Mahavir on monastic conduct) (NCERT §1.1, p. 4).

NCERT explains the physical form of Jain manuscripts in detail. Folios had a small central hole through which a binding string passed, fastening the leaves together. Wooden covers called **patlis** were placed at the top and bottom of the stack, protecting it during storage and transport (NCERT §1.1, p. 5). The earliest medium was palm leaf, which constrained the size and shape of the painted area to a long narrow rectangle.

Paper was introduced into Jain manuscript painting only in the fourteenth century, after which the painting field could expand and accommodate richer compositions. The earliest surviving palm-leaf manuscript from western India dates back to the eleventh century.

Jain stylistic features develop a distinctive visual language: bright primary colours, obsessive textile-pattern detailing, thin wiry contour lines, and a curious convention for three-dimensionality of the face — instead of foreshortening, the artist adds a further eye, projecting beyond the contour of the face, to suggest the three-quarter view. The presence of Sultanate political power in Gujarat, Mandu, Jaunpur and Patan is recorded indirectly in the Sultanate architectural vocabulary — pointed arches and bulbous domes — that appears in the painted backgrounds (NCERT §1.1, p. 6). The most creative phase of Jain painting was roughly 1350 to 1450, marked by the introduction of landscape, dance figures and musicians in the folio margins, and by lavish use of gold and lapis lazuli pigments. Beyond the main canonical texts, Jain painters also produced **Tirthipatas** (pilgrimage paintings depicting sacred sites), **Mandalas** (cosmological diagrams) and secular non-canonical narratives.

A parallel "indigenous style" developed in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, often called pre-Mughal or pre-Rajasthani painting. This indigenous style covered both Hindu and Jain subjects — the **Mahapurana**, the **Chaurpanchashika**, the **Aranyaka Parvan** of the **Mahabharata**, the **Bhagvata Purana** and the **Gita Govinda** (NCERT §1.1, p. 7). Its features include transparent fabrics, **odhnis** "ballooned" over the heroines' heads with stiff edges, suggestively rendered architecture and a distinctive convention of hatching to indicate water bodies. These features flow directly into the seventeenth-century early Rajasthani painting that will be the subject of the next chapter.

The Sultanate School of Painting arose after the late twelfth century, when Sultanate dynasties from Central Asia ruled in the north, east and west of the subcontinent. Persian, Turkic and Afghan influences mixed with indigenous Indian styles in the courts of Malwa, Gujarat and Jaunpur. The most representative example is the **Nimatnama** — the "Book of Delicacies" — painted at Mandu during the reign of Nasir Shah Khalji (1500–1510 CE). The text is a recipe book that also covers hunting, medicines, cosmetics and perfumes, illustrating the Sultanate court's interest in courtly leisure and material culture (NCERT §1.2, p. 8). The **Laurchanda** paintings exemplify the Sufi-inflected love-story stratum of this style.

The Pala School of Painting represents the last great phase of Buddhist art in India. The Pala period (750 CE to the mid-twelfth century) saw monasteries such as Nalanda and Vikramsila become great centres of Buddhist learning, where Vajrayana Buddhist deities were illustrated on palm leaves (NCERT §1.3, p. 8). Pala bronze and manuscript art spread to Nepal, Tibet, Burma, Sri Lanka and Java via pilgrims and students from South-East Asia — making Pala painting one of the most influential Indian artistic exports of the early medieval period. Pala stylistic features are marked by flowing, sinuous lines and subdued colour tones, distinguishing them clearly from the terse, brittle lines of

Jain painting and instead paralleling the sculptural-painterly language of Ajanta (NCERT §1.3, p. 9).

The single most famous Pala manuscript is the **Astahasrika Prajnaparamita** — the "Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines" — now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford. It was painted at Nalanda in the fifteenth regnal year of King Ramapala, in the last quarter of the eleventh century, and has six illustrated pages and wooden covers painted on both sides (NCERT §1.3, p. 9). Pala art ended in the first half of the thirteenth century when Muslim invaders destroyed the great monasteries of eastern India — a single line in NCERT that has appeared as a date-based CUET MCQ.

## 2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Chitrasutra	Chapter in third Khanda of Vishnudharmottara Purana (5th c.); source-book of Indian painting	1
Vishnudharmottara Purana	5th-c. text containing the Chitrasutra	1
Pratima lakshana	Canons of image-making explained in the Chitrasutra	1
Roopbheda	Looks and appearance	1
Pramana	Measurement, proportion and structure	1
Bhava	Expression of feeling	1
Lavanya yojana	Aesthetic composition	1
Sadrishya	Resemblance	1
Varnikabhanga	Use of brush and colours	1
Miniature painting	Small hand-held medieval painting	1
Manuscript illustration	Pictorial translation of textual verses on a folio	1
Colophon	Folio recording patron, artist, date and place	2
Shaastradaan	Jain practice of donating illustrated books as charity	3
Bhandar	Jain monastery library / manuscript repository	3
Patli	Wooden cover at top/bottom of a manuscript	5
Kalpasutra	Most widely illustrated Jain canonical text on the 24 Tirthankaras	3
Trishala	Mother of Mahavir; dreams 14 objects	4
Kalakacharyakatha	Jain text on Acharya Kalaka rescuing his nun sister	4
Sangrahini Sutra	12th-c. Jain cosmological text	4
Uttaradhyana Sutra	Mahavir's teachings on monastic code	4
Tirthipata	Jain pilgrimage painting	6

Term	Definition	Page
Chaurpanchasika	15th-c. landmark indigenous-style poem and folio	7
Nimatnama	"Book of Delicacies," Mandu c. 1500–1510	8
Laurchanda	Sufi-flavoured Sultanate story-painting	8
Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita	Pala palm-leaf manuscript, "Perfection of Wisdom in 8,000 Lines"	9
Vikramsila	Pala-period Buddhist monastery	8
Nalanda	Pala-period Buddhist monastery, site of Astasahasrika	8

### 2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

Specific folios reproduced in NCERT that CUET examiners draw on for image-MCQ identification: the **Sravakapratikramasutra-curni of Vijayasimha** (Mewar, 1260, Boston Collection, p. 2) shows a bundled palm-leaf manuscript with patlis; the **Birth of Mahavir, Kalpasutra** (15th century, Jain Bhandar, Rajasthan, p. 3) is the type-example of a Western Indian/Jain folio with red ground, dense textile patterns and the diagnostic further-eye facial convention; the **Trishala's Fourteen Dreams, Kalpasutra folio** (p. 4) illustrates the 14 dream-objects at Mahavir's conception. The **Kalakacharyakatha** of 1497 (N. C. Mehta Collection, Ahmedabad, p. 5) shows Kalaka, his captive sister and the magical arrow-spewing donkey; the **Sangrahini Sutra** planetary diagram (17th century, p. 5) is a cosmological folio. The **Indra praising Devasano Pado, Kalpasutra** (Gujarat, c. 1475, Boston, p. 6) demonstrates the profuse gold and lapis lazuli of the 1350–1450 creative peak.

The **Chaurpanchasika folio** (Gujarat, 15th century, p. 7) and the **Mitharam, Bhagvata Purana** of 1550 (p. 7) illustrate the indigenous pre-Rajasthani style with ballooned odhnis and water hatchings. The **Nimatnama** (Mandu, 1550, British Library, p. 8) shows the Persian-indigenous hybrid of the Sultanate style with food preparation scenes and richly patterned carpets. The **Lokeshvar, Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita folio** (Pala, 1050, National Museum, New Delhi, p. 9) demonstrates the sinuous Pala line and subdued palette.

Process to remember for any manuscript: (1) the folio is prepared (palm leaf before the 14th c.; paper from the 14th c. onwards); (2) a central hole is pierced for the binding string; (3) the text is written in a demarcated box on the upper portion or on the reverse; (4) the painting is executed in the field below the text using mineral pigments, gold leaf and lapis lazuli; (5) the folios are stacked and bound with string; (6) wooden patli covers are tied top and bottom; (7) the bundle is wrapped in cloth and stored in the bhandar.

### 2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- **Chitrasutra** is part of the **Vishnudharmottara Purana** (NOT the **Vishnu Purana**) — and it is a chapter of the **THIRD Khanda**.

- Paper came to Indian manuscript painting only in the 14th century; before that palm leaf was used. Earliest surviving palm-leaf manuscript from western India = 11th century (not 8th).
- The patlis are wooden COVERS of the manuscript, not the central string-hole.
- **Nimatnama** was patronised by Nasir Shah Khalji of Mandu (1500–1510 CE) — not by a Mughal emperor. It belongs to the Sultanate School.
- **Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita** was painted at Nalanda under Ramapala, last quarter of the 11th century. Students often confuse Nalanda with Vikramsila.
- The Jain School is a SUBSET of the Western Indian School (Jain-themed portion), not a separate parallel school.
- The "further eye" convention is for THREE-DIMENSIONALITY of the face — not for divine vision.
- Trishala dreams of FOURTEEN objects (not 16, not 12) — and Sun + Moon are counted separately.
- The **Kalakacharyakatha** features a magical DONKEY, not a horse.
- The most creative phase of Jain painting is c. 1350–1450 (not earlier or later).
- Pala art ended in the FIRST half of the 13th century with monastery destruction.
- The six angas of painting are FROM the Chitrasutra — not from the Natyashastra or any other text.

## 2.5 Key artworks / artists

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Chitrasutra	5th c. CE	Foundational text of Indian painting canons	1
Sravakapratikramasutra-curni of Vijayasimha	1260, Mewar	Bundled palm-leaf manuscript with patlis	2
Kalpasutra (Birth of Mahavir folio)	15th c., Jain Bhandar Rajasthan	Type-example of Jain miniature	3
Trishala's Fourteen Dreams, Kalpasutra	15th c., Gujarat	Conception of Mahavir	4
Kalakacharyakatha	1497, Ahmedabad	Magical donkey story	5
Sangrahini Sutra	17th c.	Planetary cosmology folio	5
Indra praising Devasano Pado, Kalpasutra	c. 1475, Gujarat, Boston	Gold and lapis lazuli peak	6
Uttaradhyana Sutra	Jain canon	Mahavir's monastic teachings	4
Tirthipata paintings	Jain		6

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
		Pilgrimage maps of sacred sites	
Chaurpanchasika	15th c., Gujarat	Landmark indigenous pre-Rajasthani folio	7
Mitharam, Bhagvata Purana	1550	Indigenous pre-Rajasthani style	7
Aranyaka Parvan of Mahabharata	16th c.	Indigenous Hindu-themed folios	7
Gita Govinda	16th c.	Indigenous Krishna-themed folios	7
Mahapurana (Jain epic)	16th c.	Indigenous Jain folios	7
Nimatnama	c. 1500–1510, Mandu	Sultanate School recipe book	8
Nasir Shah Khalji (patron)	1500–1510, Mandu	Patron of Nimatnama	8
Laurchanda paintings	Sultanate	Sufi-flavoured love story	8
Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita	c. 1050, Nalanda	Pala palm-leaf masterpiece	9
King Ramapala (patron)	11th c., Pala	Patron of Astasahasrika	9
Lokeshvar folio, Astasahasrika	Pala	Vajrayana Avalokiteshvara on palm leaf	9
Nalanda (centre)	5th–13th c., Pala	Last great Buddhist art monastery	8
Vikramsila (centre)	Pala	Buddhist learning and art monastery	8
Jain bhandars (libraries)	Western India	Custodians of Jain manuscripts	3

## Practice MCQs

## PYQ Alignment

The Manuscript Painting Tradition is a foundational chapter in CUET Fine Arts (312) and has consistently yielded direct factual MCQs in the 2023–2025 papers — typically on the Chitrasutra and its limbs, the *Nimatnama* (Mandu / Nasir Shah Khalji), the *Astasahasrika*



Prajnaparamita (Nalanda / Ramapala), and identification of Jain-school stylistic features such as the "further eye" and use of gold and lapis lazuli. Match-the-following and Assertion–Reason items frequently pair texts (Kalpasutra, Kalakacharyakatha, Sangrahi Sutra, Uttaradhyana Sutra) with their themes. CUET 2024 set a four-statement question on Jain stylistic features; CUET 2025 carried a direct-recall on Nasir Shah Khalji.

