

AMIR MOHTASHEMI



Raja and Courtesan

Bikaner, Rajasthan, India, c. 1680-85

33 cm high, 26.5 cm wide

Ink, opaque watercolour on paper

Provenance: European private collection by descent since the 1940s

Stock no.: A5177

This double-portrait of a ruler and his inamorata locked in a tight embrace has no exact counterpart in seventeenth century Rajasthani painting. The two bust-length figures are powerfully unmediated, filling the composition and being thrust forward by a black background relieved by only an unobtrusive balustrade. Exceptionally, each of the entwined figures holds a wine bottle and cup in his or her hands, and the woman is shown actively pouring more of the intoxicant. The elegant form of the swan-neck bottles, known as *ashkdan* ('container for tears'), introduces a measure of ornamental exoticism, for their narrow, curvilinear necks and leaf-shaped mouths are inspired by Murano glassware that was produced in Venice in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and imitated in Safavid Iran shortly thereafter. This type of strikingly large-scale, lascivious drinking scene almost certainly has its origins in northern Europe, where sixteenth century artists, for example, Hendrik Goltzius evoked such suggestive solicitations in taverns with an implied cash enticement or a procuress. Indeed, a c. 1730 Mewari version of a couple posed in a similar cheek-to-cheek manner retains the European-style garb and upturned moustache for the male figure as well as the presence of a procuress.¹

The meticulously rendered jewellery displayed here is remarkably varied: the emeralds on the raja's turban band and pair of royal *sarpeches*, the ruby *bugadi* at the top of his ear, the familiar two-pearl

earring, and the double-strand pearl and gem necklaces about his neck and chest. The female is bejewelled almost as opulently, with a string of pearls running along the part in her hair (*sir maga*) and terminating in a circular ornament (*tikka*), a graceful nose-ring (*nath*), a large circular earring (*kamphool* or 'ear-flower'), a double-strand pearl necklace with a large emerald pendant, and the ostentatious *hathphool* ('flower for the hand') on the back of each hand. The brilliant bits of white, green and gold in the jewellery establish a staccato surface rhythm that is extended subtly in the tiny circles that form diamond patterns and beaded borders on her tie-dyed diaphanous *odhani* (veil). All these forms stand out from the thinly painted turban, the raja's tight-fitting upper garment and the woman's sheer *choli*.

The figures are presented as both tipsy and coy, qualities conveyed by wide, half-shuttered eyes, the woman's sidelong glance and the slight incline of her head away from her paramour. The figures' faces, arms and hands are drawn with crisp precision and are modelled selectively, most skilfully around the eyes, mouth and jaw, but most distinctively in the arching yellowish brushstrokes spanning the raja's upper arm and forearm. The male's features and facial hair are adapted from those of Maharaja Anup Singh of Bikaner (b. 1638, r. 1669-98), a conceit that appears frequently in Rajasthani painting.²

This marvellous painting relates most closely to a painting ascribed to Hasan Raza, one of the two sons of 'Ali Raza, a highly accomplished early Bikaner artist.³ That work, now in the National Museum of India, New Delhi, presents an equally large-scale frontal portrait of a beauty with a very similar treatment of her eyes, mouth, nose and hair. A bust-length portrait of a lady in profile view attributed to this same artist was offered in our 2019 catalogue.

Footnotes:

1. Published in Gerd Kreisel. 1995. *Rajasthan: Land der Könige*. Stuttgart: Linden Museum Stuttgart. Abb. 111.
2. See Maharaja Anup Singh on Horseback, Bikaner, c. 1690, published in the frontispiece in Hermann Goetz. 1950. *The Art and Architecture of Bikaner State*. Oxford: Bruno Cassirer.
3. Published in Karl Khandalavala, Moti Chandra, and Pramod Chandra. 1960. *Miniature Paintings from the Sri Motichand Khajanchi Collection*. New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi. no. 90, fig. 71.