



Alwar Museum

P.L. Chakravarti

Dharmendra Kanwar

Department of Art, Literature & Culture,
Government of Rajasthan

Alwar

In a way, Alwar is the gateway to Rajasthan as it lies in close proximity to Delhi. It is surrounded by the beautiful Aravalli hills and has some very important historical sites like Bhangarh and Bairat (Viratnagar) as well as areas rich in natural beauty like Sariska National Park that is home to tigers, a wide array of flora and fauna, and the beautiful townships of Siliserh and Rajgarh. Located as it was between Rajput and Mughal territories, its rulers were shrewd and forged alliances to gain political leverage. They achieved their intention when they succeeded in establishing their principality that had so far been merely dependent on the Kachhawahas of Amber, into a strong and significant independent state.

Alwar was established as a separate state when Rao Pratap Singh won Alwar from the Mughals and founded a principality of his own. It was Pratap Singh who first raised his standard over the Bala Quila Fort on 25 November 1775.

Later rulers turned Alwar into a very well-administered state. As Jai Singh (1892-1937) was a minor at the time of succession the state administration was controlled by a council, known as the State Council, acting under the general supervision of the political agent. The State Council comprised four members and all the business of the administration was carried on by the members jointly under the advice and guidance of the political agent. The British saw this as a friendly base in Rajputana and cultivated it





as such. This period also saw a burst of architectural activity with some beautiful and extravagant monuments that were built by the rulers – summer and monsoon palaces, gardens, forts and temples.

The districts of Thanagazi, Rajgarh, Malakhera, Ajabgarh, Baldeogarh, Kankwari, Alwar, Ramgarh and Lachhmangarh, and areas around Behror and Bansur, were integrated to form the state.

Alwar Museum is housed in the old city palace and is spread over three halls. The museum is divided into three major sections, each housed in a large hall. The first section contains various archaeological finds – mainly sculptures and inscriptions from the surrounding region. In addition, there are also several items that have been presented by the rulers of the former Alwar state that include mounted skins of wild animals shot by them over the years. The second section is the most important one as it contains a unique collection of seven thousand rare manuscripts in Persian, Sanskrit, Urdu and Arabic including *Gulistan* of the great Persian poet Sa'adi as well as the *Babur Nama* dating back to the sixteenth century. The third section of the museum contains the armoury of state rulers. Various kinds of shields, swords, pistols, rifles, daggers and other items are on display. Important among them are the swords of Mohammad Ghori, Akbar and Aurangzeb.

Other items on display are artefacts of bidri work, lacquered and ivory work, musical instruments, stuffed animals, beautiful brass and pottery works from Jaipur, Multan, Bengal and Ceylon.

The collection here is considered among the best in Rajasthan.

Introduction to the Alwar Museum

There is a basic lack of authentic documentary evidence to show that indigenous arts flourished in Alwar. It was the royal court from which knowledge emanated. Owing to the interest and patronage of rulers like Maharaja Vinaya Singh, Mangal Singh and a scion of the family— Balwant Singh of Tijara, and others, that many rare and valuable specimens of Indian art were purchased and collected for the palace. These were acquired to serve as fine examples for the artists to inspire and guide them. Maharaja Vinaya Singh took interest in accumulating rare art and craft items. Several such pieces now adorn the galleries of the present museum.

The collection of the museum is arranged in three big halls of the old city palace, which was constructed during the period of the third ruler Maharaja Vinaya Singh (1815-57). Hall No.1 contains miscellaneous exhibits including costumes, wooden, stone and ivory products, musical instruments, stuffed birds and animals. All these articles are now being classified and put in sections, marked local, Rajasthani, Indian and foreign.

Kho, Jhiri and Bhangarh have made a remarkable contribution towards the supply of various types of coloured stones. There is a collection of some of the finest types of jade, the light greenish-white ground of the stone serves as an excellent foil for the gems, which are embedded in the stone pieces.

The type of cloth called *kanwal* (a piece of cloth used for the purpose of giving a knot to the skirts of the bride and the bridegroom) represents the best form of dyer's art. A layman fails to understand the secret that creates the colours and which do not pass through the gauze. It is also difficult to understand how the dyeing is done. The tie and dye work displayed in the museum is very interesting. A large number of women are even now engaged in this profession in the city. The women dyers tie knots with fine thread rather rapidly by sitting at the doors of their houses. The men work at the tub of colours close by and dye the cloth. The process is as follows:

The cloth is first dyed with the colour, which is to be used as the base colour. Parts to be left white are drawn up into a little bundle with the finger and the thumb, and covered rapidly with thread, which is twisted around a number of times and tied. The garment is then dyed in a fresh solution of colours. If the centres of the reserved spots are desired to be dyed partially with the other colour, that portion of the cloth, which is not to be dyed, is again knotted and dyed till the design is completed. This tie and dye process is a very ingenious one, although it is both cumbersome and complicated.

The village people in Alwar area also practice a kind of embroidery work, similar to *phulkari* in Punjab. This work is suited for the ornamentation of curtains. The colourful embroidery work of Mevatis, done on *ghaghra* and *lugari* (lower garments



Bhagavadgita

One scroll, with 107 coloured illustrations.

and veil), is the best specimen of folk art of its kind. The embroidered coats are very fine pieces of art, and of beauty. When worn by the central figure in a large gathering, they appear very striking.

The section on the stuffed birds and animals shot at one time by the late H.H. Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh is also very fascinating.

Lala Nand Kishore, Pannalal and others of Alwar produced superior type of workmanship in gold and silver plates, tea-sets, snuff boxes and card cases. Some of the works are on display in the first hall of the museum.

Models made in the plaster used in construction of various palaces and buildings, testify to the fact that architecture was well practiced in the former Alwar state, are also on display.

The central hall of the museum presents remarkable attractions to a lover of fine arts. It contains valuable paintings and manuscripts. The collection preserved is not only large but also the most valuable one. Paintings in the hall are classified school-wise, Alwar, Udaipur, Bikaner, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Bundi, Kotah, Bharatpur, Nathadwara, Kangra and Kishangarh. The manuscripts, mostly illustrated, are classified script-wise, such as Devnagari and Persian. A short description at the bottom of each manuscript enhances the value of the exhibits.

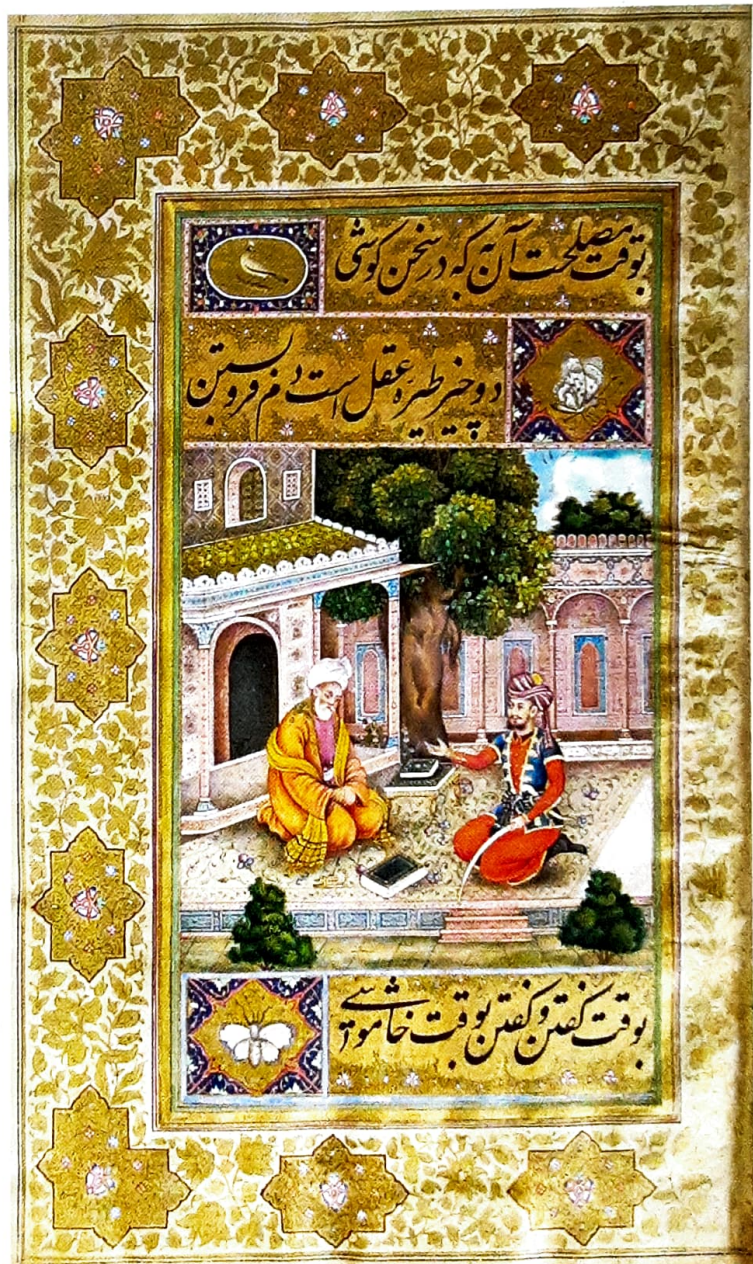
The most valued manuscript in the collection is a copy of the famous *Gulistan* – of Shaikh Sa'adi of Shiraz in Persia. The *Gulistan* (rose-garden) was written in AD 1258 and is divided into eight chapters. The book was dedicated to Abubakr-bin-said-bin Jangi, the sixth king of the Turkman, who ruled from AD 1189 to 1268. Each folio of the Alwar copy of *Gulistan* took fifteen days to create and the entire pages were designed and painted by Nath Shah and Qazi Abdul Rahman. The illustrations were done by Ghulam Ali Khan and Baldeo, artists from Alwar. Each border medallion took two to four days to be painted. The total cost of the work, including the salaries of the workers is said to have gone up to a lakh of rupees! The last illustration of the work describes Agha Mirza, the

copyist, who presented the book to Maharaja Vinaya Singh in the presence of Raja Bahadur Padma Singh, his minister or Musahib, shown seated on the ground. The Maharaja is seated on a throne beneath a canopy of a cloth of gold. Lachman Todawal Baniya, the darogah deori as head of the porters, introduces the writer Ladoo Khawas or *chauri-bardar*, one who waves a *chauri* (*chamara*) or fly-whisk, over the head of the chief, and Bal Govind Khawas holds near him a *morchhal* or a whisk of peacock's feathers, a symbol of rank.

The next exhibit, worthy of mention here, is a beautifully illustrated copy of the Quran, which was purchased from a Mohammadan traveller by Maharaja Vinaya Singh, for three thousand rupees and a dress of honour. The labour and energy spent on the execution of this exquisite work was so great that the Maharaja was very fortunate in obtaining it rather cheap. Every page is written and illustrated with utmost care and skill.

The illustrated scroll of the *Mahabharata*, sufficiently long and written on Kashmiri handmade paper, claims similar admiration for the extraordinary type of calligraphy. One requires a high-power magnifying glass to go through the work. But the most striking feature of this scroll is its perfect legibility – length and breadth-wise.

When Maharaja Balwant Singh of Tijara died, his estates reverted to the Alwar chief and his personal movable property was also brought to the capital. Amongst the valuable articles thus acquired were some beautiful and expensive paintings on cardboard. These are all mythological in character, so far as their subject-matter goes. Each picture is surrounded by a wonderfully executed border,





447/826

Badre Munir

Badre Munir sleeping on the banks of a river
with several fairies around him.

which can at best be understood by
examining the originals.

A very interesting coloured illustration depicting a procession of the emperor of Delhi, from the nineteenth century, is also housed in the museum. It is not only beautifully drawn in the style of the Delhi miniature painters, but it presents a scene which is difficult to repeat and is characteristic of the glory of India in Mughal times. The procession, in short, represents Emperor Akbar Shah II, surrounded by all the pomp of his court, proceeding along the edge of the Yamuna River, accompanied by the British resident and his staff. Another procession, similar to the one just described, is designed on a larger scale. This painting adorns the hall and is marked by the use of the traditional vehicle Indra-Vimana (elephant carriage) used on ceremonial occasions. The procession was formed on the occasion of the Dussehra festival during the period of the late H.H. Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh who has

been depicted in the painting seated on a royal elephant. The artist Shri Rama Sahaya Nepalia completed this painting with great patience and care and demonstrated his best skill and ability in executing the principal figures.

Some very good specimens of book-binding are also on display. A short account of the book-binding industry needs be presented here. The man who introduced this art in Alwar was Abdul Rahman. He learnt it from a fakir who was there visiting from Lahore. In the work there is ornamentation style giving place to colours, which appear to be inlaid and are painted on the board. In most of the designs the pattern is produced by using brass-blocks. The colours are then put on the pattern with a brush. The Alwar artists sometimes coloured the entire base and at others only a part of it so as to produce totally different effects by using the same blocks. The edges of the books are generally designed in colour. As this style of binding is only used for works of great importance, it is appropriate to their contents and is properly subordinated to the contents of the

manuscripts and is also in harmony with any one of the principal canons of design.

It is unfortunate that we do not have any information about the masters who produced such magnificent pieces of art during those times. A few of the artists are: Bakasrama, Jamunadasa, Nandarama, Baleshrama, Chhotelal, Daluram, Rangilal, Saligram, Baladev, Balarama, Nanagrama and Budharama. But many of the gems in the field remain unknown.

The last hall of the museum houses arms and armoury. Weapons in this hall are kept in beautiful showcases, and are treated chemically to enable them to remain in perfect order. Besides beautiful pieces of Rajput arms and armoury some rare arms of Mughal emperors collected by Alwar chiefs from Muslim travellers and refugees are also on display here.

Today shields have no place among the defensive weapons but that these were indispensable when people fought with bows and arrows need not be over-emphasised. Most of the shields displayed in the hall are modern ones. Some of these are beautifully inlaid with gold and silver. In damascened shields, a channel is cut in the steel and gold wire firmly hammered into the depression, specially made for it. The technique of burnishing with agates and other tools is employed to finish the work and in some instances the ground is plated with silver. When both silver and gold wires are used, the inlaying is termed as Ganga-Jamuni. The term is also used where the gold effect is applied against the silver ground. Such shields appear to have been prepared for decorative purposes or served as coats of arms. Such a shield is uniformly circular, as was in Assyria, some two or three thousand years ago.

The sword and *katar* (the flat-bladed dagger) are old national weapons of the Hindus. Some rare old sword blades find an honoured place in the collection. The hilts of these swords are indeed very interesting. The scabbards are, in most cases, made of two flat pieces of wood covered together by cloth or velvet. Some swords have special names. These are the *Talwar-i-Sosani* the curved sword with its scabbard of a certain colour of embroidered cloth and the *Kirich Fauladi* – the straight sword with watered blade. The forms and names of the dagger are almost endless. On good many number of swords and daggers, the side of the hilt is made of ivory. Walrus ivory was also sometimes used. Crystal, jade and other hard and beautiful stones are also used in the handles of weapons. The *katar* or flat dagger was used in ancient times for thrusting into the body of the enemy. Sometimes pistols were mounted on the side guards of a sword. The blades in some are grooved, and often pierced with little channels in which iron balls like small pearls are allowed to run to add to the beauty of the weapon.

The soldiers in Rajasthan in Mughal times generally wore chained armour with helmets of steel having Arabic inscription on fine links. The Persians usually protected themselves by four steel plates, which were laced together to form a cuirass to cover the vital parts in the chest. These were known collectively as the *char-aina* (four-mirrors). Some of these plates were beautifully ornamented. The armour is said to have belonged

to Jaswanta Rao Holkar, the famous predatory chief of Indore, who gave so much trouble to the British at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century.

There is a curious steel ring attached to a long shaft of the same metal in the Alwar Armoury section of the museum, originally intended to be used as a kind of lasso, with which a man riding a horse could drag his foe off his steed.

A few sculptures and inscriptions are also preserved in the museum. These pieces throw sufficient light on the past of the region. The ruins of Bhangarh, Nilkantha and Sainthli have yielded some very beautiful pieces of art. A single piece of dancing Ganesha with inscription of S.1101 is sufficient to show that Alwar area of Rajasthan was rich in art about a thousand years back. The art traditions continued for over several centuries even after it.

Another important section of the museum is its library, which attracts many scholars to research on the subject of Indology. A portion of this library came from Tijara after the death of Maharaja Balawanta Singh, but the greater part of it was collected by Maharaja Vinaya Singh. A large part of this collection consists of manuscripts in Sanskrit, Hindi, Urdu, and Persian, which stand catalogued at present on scientific lines under the personal supervision of the curator of the museum. The total number of illustrated and unillustrated manuscripts is as follows:

Sanskrit	..	..	4863
Persian	..	..	608
Hindi	..	..	374
Urdu	..	..	73

The museum in Alwar is, in short, a socio-military kind and houses rare treasures of art and culture.

P.L. Chakravarti

Ex-Curator