

## Article

# Coloring the World: Some Thoughts from Jain and Buddhist Narratives

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**Abstract:** This paper begins with an examination of early Indian speculation about colors, their number, their use, and their significance. It ranges widely from the *Upaniṣads* to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, from Śvetāmbara Jain canonical texts to Buddhaghosa's treatise on meditation, the *Visuddhimagga*, from *purāṇas* to technical treatises on painting. It turns then to examine how select Jain and Buddhist texts used color in two important scenarios, descriptions of the setting for events and the person of the Jina/Buddha. In the concluding reflections, I compare textual practices with a few examples from the visual record to ask what role if any the colors specified in a story might have played in the choices made by an artist.

**Keywords:** Buddhism; Jainism; color

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

I begin this essay with two images of Avalokiteśvara, close to each other in date, a sculpture from the 11th c. in the Cleveland Museum of art, Figure 1, and a folio from a 12th century manuscript of the *Aṣṭasāhasrika Prajñāpāramitā* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Figure 2. The Cleveland image shows traces of its original paint. Both images, of very different size, in completely different media, rely on angular lines and curves to convey movement and create a rich and complex tableau. By placing them together, I wanted to suggest that the vibrancy and motion in the painting also owe much to the skillful use of color. Thus, the oranges lead the eye from the monkey to the small figures below, down the side of the painting and around to Avalokiteśvara's larger devotee, who leans into him, hands folded, and then across to the garment and hair of the fierce figure at the viewer's right. Greens and whites similarly compel the eye to move through the painting. The careful contrasts of dark and light also create a sense of depth and three dimensionality. As our eyes move through the additional lines created by the colors, the entire scene seems to be animated. Returning to the sculpture, where light and shadow now must replace color, we can only wonder what it might have been like with its original paint.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally delivered at a symposium, Indian Buddhist Narrative: Text and Image, at New College, Edinburgh, September 2019. I thank Naomi Appleton, who organized the symposium, and Sonya Rhie Mace, Donald Stadtner, and Osmund Bopearachchi for their comments on this paper.



**Figure 1.** Lokesvara Khasarpana form of Avalokitesvara. Late 11th century. India, Nalanda, Pala Period(c.750–c.1200). Steatite;Overall: 7.7 cm (3 1/16 in.). The Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund 1991.155; Cleveland Museum of Art.



**Figure 2.** Avalokitesvara from an Aṣṭasāhasrika Prajñāpāramitā. Period: Pala period. Date: early 12th century. Culture:Bengal, eastern India or Bangladesh. Dimensions: Page: 2 3/4 × 16 7/16 in. (7 × 41.8 cm). Image: 2 1/2 × 1 15/16 in. (6.4 × 4.9 cm). Credit Line: Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 2001. Accession Number: 2001.4451. Metropolitan Museum.

There is considerable evidence that sculptures like this one were regularly painted (Zin 2012, pp. 149–67). The loss of their color gives us an incomplete understanding of the effects of color in art. The colors on a painting do not give us an entirely adequate idea of how color in sculpture would have been experienced. The medium of an art work significantly affects our experience of color (Gage 2005, p. 9). That early and medieval Indian sculptures were painted should not surprise us, given recent

work on Greek sculptures that has revealed traces of paint. Reconstructions of painted Greek sculptures are startling in the brilliance and variety of the colors (Brinkmann et al. 2017). Color, whether in the visual arts or in literature, was a vital component of the aesthetic and often the religious experience in India. The importance of color in Sanskrit literature is apparent from its beginnings and if anything increases over the centuries as descriptions become more and more elaborate.

Kālidāsa's *Kumārasambhava*, celebrating the birth of the god Skanda to Śiva and Pārvatī, makes ample use of color in its descriptions of the setting of the story and its hero and heroine. The setting for the poem is the great mountain Himālaya, a description of which begins the poem. Kālidāsa uses a puranic myth, that the ancient King Pṛthu milked the earth, which had taken the form of a cow, to tell us that Mount Himalaya is resplendent with many colors and aglow with its luminous plants. Here is the verse, 1.2, "Commanded by King Pṛthu, all the other mountains took Mount Himālaya as their calf, and with Mount Meru, skilled in milking, they milked the earth to yield shining gemstones and luminous plants." The commentary of Mallinātha explains that since a calf is so dear to its mother, it gets the best of whatever there is, in this case, the best jewels and glowing plants. It is understood that jewels have rich color; this combination of color and radiance will be a hallmark of classical Indian descriptions. In the next verse, the poet adds whiteness to the variegated colors of the jewels, reassuring us that the snow on Mount Himālaya, which is the source of innumerable gemstones, does not detract from its beauty, any more than the spot on the moon, with all its bright rays, detracts from the moon's loveliness. The mountain Himālaya also has minerals that give it color, here a red color. For the poet, the minerals on its peaks cast their redness onto the clouds, creating an untimely sunset. Heavenly damsels adorn themselves with these minerals, getting ready for their lovers (4). In verse 7, heavenly maidens write their love letters with a red mineral paint; in this verse, too, the mountain is both white and colorful. Other colors are provided by the peacocks, their feathers spread open by the wind (15). As the verses on the gemstones and luminescent plants make clear, it is not just color that makes the mountain so distinctive; it is also light. And so it is no surprise that dark caves, where semi-divine beings make love, are illuminated by plants that glow in the night (10). It is not only the setting of the poem that is so rich in color. Kālidāsa also describes the goddess Pārvatī in some detail, and there too colors are important. Indeed, he offers high praise for painting in color when he tells us that puberty makes the beauty of the young goddess shine forth, just as applying paint with a brush makes a drawing come alive (32). We can surmise that one of the things that puberty does is bestow upon her body the colors associated with the mature woman. Her smile is likened to a flower resting on a young sprout or a pearl set into coral, being white from her teeth and pink from her lips (44), while her breasts are white with dark nipples (40). Her darting glances are like quivering blue lotuses (46), while her black eyebrows seem to have been painted in collyrium with a fine brush (47).

Several things stand out in verses like these. The first is the attention given to color in the descriptions of the setting and the body of the goddess. The second is the use of colored objects, gemstones, for example, in addition to specific color words to denote colors. Also noteworthy is the use of familiar natural objects as similes to enrich the description of colors. We shall see that the use of things from nature as similes along with color words or by themselves as substitutes for color words is widespread in texts of all genres and across religions. Another point worth emphasizing is what will be a common pairing of colors and light or radiance. Hue and luster are equally emphasized in the treatment of color in written sources.

As descriptive passages in literature grow more and more complex with time, so does the language of colors. The 13th century *Vikramtakaurava*, a drama by the Jain poet Hastimalla, includes elaborate descriptions of settings and characters. The play is about the marriage of a Kuru king Jaya with Sulocanā, princess of Kāśī.<sup>2</sup> Hastimalla makes excellent use of the convention that particular flowers are associated with specific colors and may be called upon by a poet as substitutes for color words:

<sup>2</sup> For a summary of the plot (Warder 2004, pp. 829–49).

to readers familiar with flowers in nature and literature, simply naming flowers in descriptions of gardens or forests evokes their vibrant colors. The play also has a fulsome description of a garden in which the colors of some of the flowering trees are also described in complex similes. The punnāga flowers have petals that are white like pure silver, with filaments that have the orange color of gold powder and a center that is round and pink like a piece of coral. Madhuka flowers that have just fallen from the tree are white like pearls, while kimśuka flowers are blood-red, as if soaked in the blood of lovers whose hearts were broken; they are red like the nails of the beast that is the God of Love. It is not only flowers that make the garden so colorful; fruits too are known for their color. In a verse the colorful fruits are also an erotic stimulus, for they remind the king who is looking at them of the colors on the bodies of women. Ripe pomegranates, fallen from the trees, are the color that their red lips give to the teeth of women from Bengal (they are pink, in other words), while fragrant citron fruits, the color of molten gold, resemble the cheeks of women from Kashmir.<sup>3</sup> Even an aging bawd provides the poet with an opportunity to revel in color (*Vikrāmtakaurava* verse 14, p. 49). The old crone has dyed her hair black, but the color is growing out. Her hair is its natural white at the roots, the color of a young barley sprout; then it becomes purple like madder and then reddish like the tubes of a kankeli flower; next it takes on the hue of the tender filament of a śirīṣa flower and finally at the tips it is the color of a crow's feathers.<sup>4</sup> Colors are also one of the identifying markers of regional origin; kings from Kashmir are fair-skinned with red hair, while kings from Andhra have dark skin the color of black aloes wood (*Vikrāmtakaurava* verses 23 and 24, p. 53).<sup>5</sup> The clear association of fruits, flowers and birds with specific colors allows the author precisely to pinpoint the color intended in a description, and in other cases to substitute these color-bearers for color words themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Kālidāsa's poem and Hastimalla's drama amply attest to the importance of color in descriptions of place and human form across time, literary genre, and religious affiliation. Dazzling colors are given their due in equally dazzling language to create a world of radiant beauty. We have some indication that the pleasure of experiencing color was not confined to the world of literature. A passage in a Buddhist monastic code opens with a brief description of the lodgings of non-Buddhist ascetics: they were white-washed and had black floors; their walls had painted red decorations. So beautiful were they that people flocked to see them. Learning of this, the Buddha permitted his monks to white-wash their monasteries, paint the floors black, and apply yellow orpiment to decorate the walls. He did draw the line at having the walls painted with figures of men and women. People would have to come to appreciate the beautiful colors of the monastery buildings (*Vinaya Cūlavagga*, para. 298–99). But if colors in poetry and architecture were primarily a sensory delight, they had other numerous and complex associations in early and medieval texts. I begin with a survey of some of these with the following questions in mind. What kinds of texts talked about color? What were the primary colors? How are colors identified? What is the significance of color? From this more general discussion that draws from texts of very different genres, I then turn specifically to see how colors figure in some narrative texts in Jainism and Buddhism. In my closing comments, I ask whether there is any evidence that the colors specified in a written text served as a guide for visual artists.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *ṇimmalarūppacchavidhavalujaladalāi tavaṇijjaccuṇṇasāricchāruṇakesarukkarāi viddumakhaṇḍavilohiavaṭṭulakaṇṇiāi punṇāipupphāi; thoramutthāhalaphaliḥadhalālāi ... mahuakusumāi; khaṇḍiajaṇahiaukkhamaṇḍaṇasamkaṇṭavahalaruhirak addamasaramjīai uddāmamaaramdasaddalaṇaharamkurāi ... kimśuakusumāi. Vikrāmtakaurava* p. 28. Verse 16, p. 29 for the pomegranates (*gauḍinām adharadalarucārāmjitām daṇṭapankṭim*) and citron fruits, (*niṣṭaptasvarṇavarṇachavi and kāśmīraganḍaśobhā*).

<sup>4</sup> *mūle vālayavaprarahadhalālān labdhasvabhāvāmstato māṇjīṣṭhaprasaracchavān aṭha caratkaṇṭakelīnālāruṇān/ paścānmugdhaśarīṣakesararucaḥ prāṇte ca kākacchadacchāyān mūrdhni kacān karotyapasaram nīlraso bhāvitaḥ.*

<sup>5</sup> *gauratviṣaḥ karkaśababhrukeśāḥ; kālāgurukālavarṇāḥ.*

<sup>6</sup> Indian texts are not unique in defining color by reference to something in the natural world. Chinese texts did the same, for example, the *Shiming, Explanation of Names*, ca. 100 CE, cited in (Kuhn 2012, p. 22). Because color terms were so imprecise, medieval European medical writers often referred to objects in daily life in order to convey the more precise meaning of a color term (Hickey 2015, p. 6). Helen Hickey, "Medical Diagnosis and the Colour Yellow in Early Modern England", *E-rea, Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone*, 12.2, 2015, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> I do not consider iconographic texts and the well-known practice of color-coding deities.



## 2. Talking about Color

A useful place to begin our explanation of traditional Indian concepts of color is with some of the earliest philosophical speculations. In the *Upaniṣads* and early philosophical systems like the Sāṃkhya, the building blocks of the physical world, the basic constituents of matter, are colored. Chapter 6 of the *Chandogya Upaniṣad* with its creation theory may be taken as an example. An inchoate, undifferentiated but existent first cause creates three entities: heat (*tejas*), water (*āpas*) and food (*anna*) 6.2.3 and 6.2.4. In a further step that will give rise to the objects in the world as we know them, the three entities are then each split into three parts and everything that is subsequently created will have this three-fold nature. Every object in the world is thus a combination of heat, water and food, and we know this because all objects are also tri-colored and their three colors are the three colors of their constituents. The *Upaniṣad* gives a few examples of heat substances that are in fact made up of all three constituents. It starts with fire and tells us that the red (*rohita*) in fire is *tejas* or heat (Chandogya 6; Olivelle 1996, pp. 148–49). The black or *kṛṣṇa* component is food or *anna* and the white or *śukla* is water (6.4.1). Then come the sun, the moon, and lightning. In his commentary, Śaṃkara tells us that the same holds true for substances that are predominantly water or food.<sup>8</sup>

In another passage, the *Upaniṣad* knows five colors: brown (*piṅgala*), white (*śukla*), blue/black (*nīla*), yellow (*pīta*) and red or *lohita* (8.6.1).<sup>9</sup> These are the colors of the five fluids or *rasas* that fill the channels that come from the heart. In his commentary, Śaṃkara explains that the color *piṅgala* comes from a combination of the humor bile, *pitta*, with a small amount of the humor phlegm, *kapha*; when *kapha* predominates in the combination the fluid is white; when *pitta* is combined with an preponderance of the third humor, the wind humor, the fluid is black; when the two humors of *pitta* and *kapha* are equal, the fluid is yellow; when blood predominates the fluid is red. He adds that those who are still curious should consult a medical man (Chandogya 8.6.1). A similar passage appears in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.20, and in his commentary there Śaṃkara states that as the amount of each of the humors changes, the colors of the fluids will change and that there are many more possibilities than just these basic ones that are named. In these early *Upaniṣads*, all of the physical world has color and it is by color that we know the underlying reality of what we experience. Our own bodies are not excluded from this; they are also polychrome.

Whether the building blocks of the material world are many or one, the source of material creation is colored. The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 4.5 describes the root cause of matter as one, unborn, and tri-colored, red, white and black. These are the colors of her constituent *guṇas*, *rajas*, *sattva*, and *tamas*. The source of the material world as one, feminine and composed of these three constituents is a fundamental tenet of the Sāṃkhya system. Vācaspati Miśra in his commentary to the *Sāṃkhyakārikās* cites the *Śvetāśvatara* verse (*Tatvokaumudī* p. 41; *Śvetāśvatara* verse 4.5).<sup>10</sup> These *guṇas* are indirectly responsible for our character; there are people who have a preponderance of one or the other and are therefore either good and wise (*sattva*), passionate and easily angered (*rajas*), or deluded and stupid (*tamas*).<sup>11</sup>

Given the importance of color in early philosophical speculation, it should come as no surprise when we turn to an entirely different early text, Bharata's work on dramaturgy, the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and learn that colors characterize both the external world and internal emotional states. They reflect or represent emotional states, moral values, social distinction and even realms of rebirth. A discussion of

<sup>8</sup> abannaviṣayānyapyudāharaṇānyevameva ca draṣṭavyānīti manyate śrutiḥ/tejasa udāharaṇamupalakṣaṇārtham /rūpavattvātsapaṣṭārthatvopapatteṣca/commentary to 6.4.2.3.4.

<sup>9</sup> There is some uncertainty about the exact equivalent of *piṅgala*. (Olivelle 1996, p. 170) gives orange. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.20 uses the term *harita* instead of *pīta*.

<sup>10</sup> Ajām ekām lohitaśuklakṛṣṇām.

<sup>11</sup> Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika authors recognize color, *rūpa*, as an essential property of three substances, earth, water, and fire, but are otherwise uninterested in describing colors in any detail. The statement in Vātsyāyana's commentary to *Nyāya sūtra* 3,1,57 is typical and implies that the colors are well known: rūpāni śuklaharitaḍṇi.

colors appears in several places in the text. In chp. 6, each of the *rasas* or poetic sentiments is assigned a color. “Love is dark green, humor is said to be white; pity is grey, and the fearsome is said to be red. The heroic is known to be golden and terror, black. Disgust is dark blue and wonder is yellow.”<sup>12</sup> Abhinavagupta in his commentary explains that the *rasas* are assigned color to aid in meditation when one meditates on them. He adds that others say the colors also refer to skin color, and here I presume of the actor/character who is involved in a particular *rasa* (*Abhinavabhārati* p. 701).<sup>13</sup>

That colors refer to or reflect emotional states finds a counterpart in many other texts in which colors are assigned a moral value. It is commonplace in Buddhist texts to have karma, good and bad deeds, described as white and black, respectively. In the *avadānas*, the Buddha tells the monks again and again that the retribution for solely black deeds is totally black; the retribution for totally white deeds is purely white, while the retribution for deeds that are a mixture of white and black is mixed (*Divyāvadāna* 14.20)<sup>14</sup> This mixed color can, however, be the best one in some circumstances. One Buddhist story tells us that the breast milk of a wet nurse whose skin is excessively dark is too cold for a baby, while the milk of a wet nurse who is excessively light skinned is too hot (*Mūgapakkhajātakavaṇṇanā* 538).<sup>15</sup> More often, however, black is bad and white is good. Thus, the correct Buddhist path is called the white path or *sukkapatha*, while the wrong path of the non-Buddhist heretics is the black path or *kanhapatipada*.<sup>16</sup>

In Jainism, the association of colors with emotions/moral states is even more complex. In Jainism, people can have six or in some texts seven different hues or complexions. These are called *leśyās*, a term that simply means color or luster in an early canonical text of the Śvetāmbaras, the *Sūyagaḍaṅga* or *Sūtrakṛtāṅga*, verse 364.<sup>17</sup> Chapter 34 of the *Uttarādhyāyana sūtra* is devoted to the *leśyās*. The commentators go to great length to try to explain exactly what these *leśyās* are. Śāntisūri, who offers the most complicated explanations, ends his ruminations with my favorite phrase, “*tattvaṃ punaḥ kevalino vidanti*”, “The true state of affairs only the Omniscient Ones know” (*śrīmāntuyttarādhyāyanāni*, p. 651a). One of his explanations is that the *leśyās* refer not to the body but to the complexion of the soul itself, being a transformation of the soul; other explanations define them as material particles that are in turn responsible for the duration of certain types of karma. The *leśyās* are black, dark blue, grey, shining gold, pink, and white.<sup>18</sup> The *sūtra* then explains what each color is like and it does so by referring to things in nature, the color of which would have been readily known by the *sūtra*’s audience. As noted above, it is commonplace in Indian literature of every genre to refer to colors either with an explicit mention of something that has the color or even by just naming the object that has the color. Thus something can be white like a conch shell or it can be conch-shell-colored.<sup>19</sup> In addition, referring to an object the color of which is known can help pin down the meaning of color terms which are often fluid. I give here only a few examples from the section on *leśyās*, but I will return to this below. The black *leśyā* is the color of a rain cloud, or a buffalo horn; the blue is the color of the tail of a caṣa bird or lapis lazuli. Grey is like the neck of a pigeon; pink is the color of the rising sun or a parrot’s beak; gold is the color of turmeric or orpiment, white is like the conch shell, milk or pearls.

The *Uttarādhyāyana sūtra* was frequently illustrated. For the chapter on the *leśyās*, the illustrations depicted a parable that was told in the commentaries to the text, about a group of hungry men who

<sup>12</sup> śyāmo bhavati śrīṅgārah sito hāsyah prakīrtitah/kapotah karuṇaścaiva rakto raudrah prakīrtitah//BhN\_6.42//gauro vīrastu vijñeyah kṛṣṇaścaiva bhayānakah/nilavarṇastu bibhatsah pīṭaścaivādbhutah smṛtah//BhN\_6.43.

<sup>13</sup> varṇābhīdhānam pūjādau dhyāna upayogi. Mukharāge’pītyanye.

<sup>14</sup> ti bhikṣava ekāntakṛṣṇānāmekāntakṛṣṇo vipākah, ekāntasuklānām dharmāṇamekāntasuklo vipākah, vyatimiśrah/ vyatimiśrah/.

<sup>15</sup> atikālikāya khīraṃ atisīṭalaṃ hoti, atidātāya khīraṃ atiuṇhaṃ hoti.

<sup>16</sup> For example, the Apanṇaka jātaḥ, Tesu ye apanṇakatthānaṃ aggahesum, te sukkapaṭipadaṃ paṭipannā. Ye dutiyaṃ “purato bhavitaḥ udakenā”ti takkaggāhasaṅkhātāṃ aniyāyānikakāraṇaṃ aggahesum. Te kanhapatipadaṃ paṭipannā.

<sup>17</sup> mahī majjhaṃmi thite nagimḍe pannāyate sūriyasuddhalese/Evaṃ sirīe bhūriṇne manorame joyai accimālī.

<sup>18</sup> Kīṇhā nilā kāu ya teū pamhā taheva ya sukkā, p. 651a. (Jacobi 1985) translates *teū* as yellow and *padmā* as red.

<sup>19</sup> The *Daśakumāracarita* of Daṇḍin provides a striking example of this in the opening description of the king, whose fame is described as like the autumn moon, jasmine, camphor, snow, a pearl garland, a lotus filament, a swan, Indra’s elephant, milk, Śiva’s loud laugh, Mount Kailāsa, hemp flowers, but with no word for white śaradindughanasāranīhārahāramṇālarālasuragajanīrakṣīragirīśāṭṭhahāsakailāsakāśa.

come upon a fruit tree. The *leśyās* in the list represent states of the soul in ascending order; black is the worst, white is the best. The person with the black *leśyā* just wants to cut the whole tree down to get at a fruit; the person with the white *leśyā* eschews any violence to the tree and is willing only to take a fruit that has already fallen. In some of the illustrations, the different *leśyās* are reflected in the skin color of the men; in others, they are shown by the colors of their clothing.

Illustrations of the *leśyās* in which skin color and clothing reflect character bring us back to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, in which skin color and the color of a person's clothing have a wide range of significance. Thus, in chp. 21 we learn that the semi-divine *vidyādhara* women wear white (21.57), while demon women, *rākṣasīs*, wear black and have jewels that are made of sapphire, *indranīla* (21.62–63). In the case of human women, dress and color reflect the place where the women are from (21.66). Over the centuries, painters seem to have followed this general practice. A frieze from the 16th century at Lepaksi shows women of distinctively different skin color and differently patterned clothing.<sup>20</sup> In the wall painting of the *Talapattajātaka* from Mulkirigala Sri Lanka, of the 19th century, Figure 3, the artist has taken pains to distinguish the five companions to the Bodhisattva by dress and skin color. This kind of color-coding recalls the kind of color-coding we see in iconographic texts.



Figure 3. Talapatta Jātaka from Mulkirigala, Sri Lanka, courtesy Osmund Bopearachchi.

Men in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* are treated separately from women. They are supposed to paint their limbs with one of the four primary colors (21.77–78). In the Pali Buddhist *Vinaya*, *Mahāvagga*, *Bhesajjavatthu* this seems to be exactly what the Licchavi men have done. The text tells us that some of the Licchavi men are blue, some yellow, some red and some white. Buddhaghosa in his commentary to this passage remarks that this is not their natural color; they have used body paint.<sup>21</sup> The colors that the Licchavis have used are the primary colors in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, white, dark blue/black, yellow and red, the colors that men are supposed to use as body paint.<sup>22</sup> Buddhaghosa seems to consider these four colors as the basic colors; in his meditation manual, the *Visuddhimagga*, IV.24, in describing the earth *kasina*,

<sup>20</sup> Vīrabhadra temple; photograph artstor [https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/ARTSTOR\\_103\\_41822003575691;prevRouteTS=1558985157727](https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822003575691;prevRouteTS=1558985157727).

<sup>21</sup> Tattha na tesam pakativanṇā nīlā, nīlavilepanānaṃ vicittatāvasenetam vuttaṃ paragraph 289. The same description of the Licchavis appears in the *Mahāparinibbāna sutta*.

<sup>22</sup> sito nīlaśca pītaśca caturtho rakta eva ca//BhN\_21.78//ete svabhāvajā varṇā yaiḥ kāryam tvaṅgavartanam/.

he instructs the practitioner to construct a disk of clay that is not blue, yellow, red or white. It is to be made from the clay like that of the river Ganga, which is of the color *aruṇa*.<sup>23</sup> Much later in time, the god Kṛṣṇa will be said to appear in the four different world ages in these four colors: white, red, yellow and black in that order. In the case of Kṛṣṇa, these are the color of his skin and not body paint (*Bṛhatstotratratnākara* p. 159). In some Vaiṣṇava poetry, the dark color of Kṛṣṇa's skin becomes a kind of metonymy for Kṛṣṇa himself. Thus Rādhā, awaiting his arrival, looks at the dark color of the forest and the black clouds above and sees everywhere her longed-for Kṛṣṇa (*Mayūracandrikā* canto 7; Das 1965, p. 41). In the *Gītāgovinda* of Jayadeva, 6.7-2, Rādhā mistakes the darkness for Kṛṣṇa and hugs and kisses it.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* calls these four pigments natural colors, *svabhāvaja*, in contrast to the colors that are made from combining these, the *saṃyogaja* colors, which are called secondary colors or *upavarṇa* (21.79). Combining white and black gives grey (*kāraṇḍava*) (21.80), while combining white and yellow gives off-white (*pāṇḍu*) 21.81.<sup>24</sup> Combining white and red gives pink or *padma* (21.81). Yellow and blue give green (*harita*), while blue and red give burnt-red *kaśāya* (21.82), and red and yellow together give gold (*gaura*) (21.82–83). There are many other kinds of combinations that can then be made from these as a base.

The primary colors are not always four in number. The *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* 3.40.16, lists five primary colors, white (*śveta*), yellow (*pīta*), red (*vilomata*, myrobalan), black (*kṛṣṇa*) and dark blue (*nīla*)<sup>25</sup> The text describes various combinations of these and the raw materials from which the paints are made. They include organic and inorganic materials. The painter is to combine the paints as he sees fit to make hundreds and thousands of colors.

Colors are of interest not only to painters, but also to cloth dyers. The Buddhist rules for monks prohibit monks from wearing robes or sandals that are of a single, even color. The colors include dark blue (*nīla*), yellow (*pīta*), red (*lohita*), purple (*mañjīṭṭha*), black (*kaṇha*), and cloths dyed with something called *mahāraṅga* and *mahānāmarāṅga*. Not surprisingly, Buddhaghosa in his commentary explains all but one of these colors by reference to flowers, with the exception of *mahāraṅga*, which is the color of the back of a scorpion, and *mahānāma* which is defined as a very deep red.<sup>26</sup> Buddhaghosa explains what a monk should do if he receives such a cloth; he is to take any kind of dye that he has at hand and a rag and rub the cloth so that the cloth will no longer be of a solid unbroken color. The color of an ascetic's robe could also be an important marker of sectarian identity. Cloth dyes, particularly the ease or difficulty with which they may be washed off or simply wear off, become metaphors for mental states as divergent from each other as passion and scriptural learning.<sup>27</sup>

Ritual specialists were equally attuned to the unique properties of colors; the *Vimānārcanākalpa* chp. 43 tells us that different colored flowers are to be used in rituals that have different aims (*Vimānārcanākalpa* 1926, pp. 292–93). Thus, white flowers are to be used for rituals of pacification, while yellow are to be used for rituals designed for material gain, and black for rituals to subdue someone and rituals to do someone harm.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *nīlalapītalohitaodātasambhedavasena hi cattāro pathavīkaṣiṇadosā. Tasmā nīlādivaṇṇaṃ mattikaṃ aggahetvā gaṅgāvahe mattikāsadisāya aruṇavaṇṇāya mattikāya kaṣiṇaṃ kātappaṃ.* The difficulty is with the precise color *aruṇa*, which is often given in the dictionary as red. It must be distinguished from *lohita*, which is prohibited. It is also worth noting that the practitioner is to avoid focusing on the color of the *kaṣiṇa* disk; color is an obstruction to the practice of meditation.

<sup>24</sup> *Pāṇḍu* is the color of people who are sick or frightened or sad; it is difficult to find an exact English equivalent, as is the case for many color terms. A *kāraṇḍava* is a duck; a variant reading gives *kapota*, dove. This and the color for pink, *padma* or lotus, are examples of the use of a familiar colored object to denote a color.

<sup>25</sup> (Shah 1990) offers Myrobalan for *vilomata* with no comment. For comments on painting in this and other texts (Nardi 2007, pp. 291–303).

<sup>26</sup> *Vinaya, Mahāvagga, Cammakhandako para. 246 and Cīvarakkhandako para. 372.* The explanations of the commentator Buddhaghosa are given in the *Cammakkhandā* passage. The same prohibition is found in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya, Cīvaravastu* (Dutt 1945, p. 95).

<sup>27</sup> On passion *Śrīgāraṃaṇḍikā* p. 12; on the ability to retain the teaching, see the 15th c. Jain *Upadeśaratnākara*, taraṅgas 4 and 5.

<sup>28</sup> I thank Gerard Colas for this reference.



I turn now to Buddhist and Jain narratives to see what use is made of these many opportunities to color the world in all these myriad colors.

### 3. Coloring the World

The most natural place to look for color in a story is in the setting and the description of the characters. I begin with a Jain sūtra, which in its exuberant use of color highlights what is possible in a text. The *Aupapātika Sūtra* is classified as one of the *upāṅgas* or minor canonical texts by the Śvetāmbara Jains. The text serves as the template for all of the other canonical texts; its lavish descriptions appear in abbreviated forms elsewhere, and commentators direct their readers to the full form in the *Aupapātika*. After a fulsome description of the city of Campā the author describes the shrine of the Yakṣa Pūrṇabhadra, the Punnabhadda Ceiya, which lies just outside the city. The ceiya itself has flags and worshippers have scattered their flowers of five-different colors; it is fragrant with incense, and frequented by crowds of people who come to worship. The ceiya is surrounded by a forest grove and it is here that the author really begins to describe the colors of the ceiya. The forest grove is black, has a black sheen; it is dark blue, and has a dark blue sheen; it is green and has a green sheen. Again, it is black and with a black shadow; dark blue with dark blue shadow; green with green shadow (*Aupapātika* p. 72). The trees are always in bloom and the forest resounds with the song of many different kinds of birds, all individually named.

The commentator to this passage, the 10th c. Abhayadevasūri, takes some care with the colors. He remarks that the forest shows these different colors in different places. He explains that dark blue, *nīla*, means a color like that of the neck of a peacock, *mayūragalavat*. Green or *harita*, is like the tail of a parrot, *śukapucchavat*. Abhayadeva also states that in calling the forest black and then saying that it provides black shade the author is not guilty of the flaw of repetition; a shadow is a substance that is produced by the occlusion of the sun.<sup>29</sup> In the center of the forest is a large Aśoka tree, which is also described in detail. It is surrounded by many different species of trees, each named. Under the Aśoka tree is a special stone slab. It is black color and the author provides a long list of things which it resembles in color. It is like kohlrabi (*añjana*), like the garment that the god Balabhadra wears; like a buffalo's horn; like a riṣṭaka jewel; like various plants; it is the color of the pupil of the eye. The commentator explains that it is in fact *nīla*, dark blue, although the text calls it black, *kiṇha* (*Aupapātika* p. 77). It is decorated with various designs, and the text provides a standard list of the *bhaticitta* or paintings (often wall paintings). They include fabulous beasts (*ihāmiya*), bulls, horses, people, fabulous sea creatures (*magara*), birds, creepers and more.<sup>30</sup> We are introduced to the king and queen and then to the Jina Mahāvīra. After a list of standard epithets, best of men, lion among men, rut elephant among men, tiṭṭhakara, perfectly enlightened one, we are treated to a long description of his body, and this description, like that of the forest, emphasizes colors. He has the most excellent skin color (*chavī*); his most excellent, perfectly healthy, incomparable flesh is stark white (*nirāyanikauttamapasatthaaiseyaniruvamapale*); his body is radiant and his hair is dark black. The text here gives another list of black things with which his hair shares the same color. They include lamp black, a bee, a black gemstone. His scalp is red, and here instead of a color word the author just provides a list of red things: his scalp is like a *dālīma* flower, like gold. Abhayadeva suggests that it is the color of red-gold (*Aupapātika* p. 84). His forehead is like the crescent moon and his face like the full moon. His eyebrows are black, and again we get a list of black things that they are like: black bees, a line of black clouds. The white part of his eyes is white like a full blown lotus. His lips are pink like polished coral, a bimba fruit, and his teeth are white, like among other things the crescent moon, a conch, the froth of fresh cow's milk, jasmine. His tongue and palate are red like gold that has been

<sup>29</sup> Chāyā cādityāvaraṇajanyo vastuviśeṣaḥ. On the Jain conception of shadows, see (Granoff 2004, pp. 331–35).

<sup>30</sup> Abhayadeva glosses *ihāmiya* as wolves, *vṛka*. He also notes that in some texts this stone slab is described slightly differently (*Aupapātika* p. 77).

purified by fire and his palms are red with nails slightly pink. Even the hair on his body is described; it is black (*Aupapātika* pp. 85–87).

The description of Mahāvīra continues, but this should suffice to show the importance the author places on describing every inch of Mahāvīra's body and the extent to which color is important in the description. The description is generally based on the standard auspicious marks or *lakṣaṇas* for an exceptional human being that Jainism shares with Buddhism and Hinduism. It is more appropriate to a prince than an ascetic; it includes, for example, precise details about his hair and beard, which are not strictly speaking appropriate to Mahāvīra. The Jain text also has a close parallel in a Buddhist text on painting, the *Citrakṣaṇa* of Nagnajit, with which it is closely contemporary. The *Citrakṣaṇa* as it assigns various colors to different parts of the body may have also based its descriptions on the standard list of auspicious marks. Lips are to be red like a bimba fruit (3.37), while the soles of the feet, the palms of the hands and nails should be red (3. 61; 3.69; 3.82). The teeth should be white like jasmine (3.105) and the tongue and palate should be red (3.107). Hair should be dark, like the neck of a peacock, a bee or collyrium (3.111). The *Citrakṣaṇa*, like the *Aupapātika*, often uses such similes to expand the description of colors.<sup>31</sup>

The *Aupapātika* uses both direct words to denote color, *ratta* (*rakta*) for red, *kiṇha* or *krṣṇa* for black, *dhavala* for white, *āyamba* or *ātamra* for pink, and similes. Objects of a particular color are often mentioned along with a color word to heighten or pin down the precise color denoted by the color word. Colored objects may even be used alone to stand in for a color word. The description of the forest emphasizes both color and sheen; the grove is black and of black sheen, *kiṇhe kiṇobhāse*. Radiance, luster, shine are as important as hue, which is in keeping with the frequent references to gemstones in descriptions here and in other Indian texts.<sup>32</sup> There are other passages in this text equally rich in colors, for example the description of early morning, where the ruddy dawn is like the color of a lotus, an Aśoka blossom, a kimsuka flower, a parrot's beak (*Aupapātika* p. 94). Color is essential to the experience of the world of this text in every way; Mahāvīra will come to preach a sermon, but where he preaches, what he looks like, what the day looks like, all of these details are filled with color.

When we turn to Buddhist texts, we can see at once that we are in a very different textual world, whether we look at Pali *suttas* or Sanskrit texts. The Pali *suttas* begin by stating where the Buddha preached the text; in the *jātakas* typically the text also includes a description of the circumstances that prompted the Buddha to tell the story of the past. We are, however, given no details about the place where the Buddha delivered his sermon that parallel the lush descriptions of the Jain *Aupapātika*.<sup>33</sup> In the Mahāyāna sūtras, any description of the place where the preaching occurs is displaced by long incantatory lists of the monks and Bodhisattvas in the audience. In the rare case in which the body of the Buddha is described in the Pali texts, that description too is brief. Thus in the *Apaṇṇakajātaka*, the heretics see the Buddha, whose face is as beautiful as the full moon, *puṇṇacandasasirikam mukham*, whose body is adorned by the primary and secondary marks, and who projects rays from his body. While a few of these marks involve the color of a body part (white teeth, a golden body, dark hair, pink palms, pink tongue), these details were clearly not deemed sufficiently important for our authors to single them out for explicit mention. It is only one mark in particular that is consistently noted; this is the golden body of the Buddha. Indeed, the body of the Buddha is golden not only in his final rebirth as the Buddha, but even in many of his previous rebirths. Thus, even when he is born as a deer, he is golden in color (*Nigrodhamigajātaka* 12). So essential is his golden color that its loss is an indication that he is unwell, physically or mentally. In one *jātaka*, the Bodhisattva is a young prince. He hears his father order the corporal punishment of four thieves and cringes at the brutality of kingship. He is

<sup>31</sup> The Sanskrit version of this text is a reconstruction from Tibetan. For details, see (Lefevre 2011, p. 102).

<sup>32</sup> (Gage 2005, p. 16) notes that the Romans also valued shine and emphasized gold and silver in their descriptions of buildings.

<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Walters, in his paper at the Edinburgh conference, detailed the lush descriptions of place in the *Apadānas*. The *Jātakas* and their commentary also can be rich in descriptive passages. My focus here has been only on the settings of the Buddha's sermons at the opening of a text.

certain that his father will go to hell for having so much pain inflicted on others. He recalls his own past birth as a king, after which he was roasted in hell. Knowing that if he becomes a king again, a hellish rebirth awaits him, he becomes frightened, and his body, formerly gold, loses its luster, like a lotus blossom that has been crushed between one's fingers.<sup>34</sup> The Buddha's loss of his gold color in his final rebirth in which he will become the Buddha is a sign of his ill health during the fruitless fast he undertook before he discovered the correct path. The Pali *Jātakatthakathā* describes his change in skin color, "And from not eating his body turned pitch black. That body that had been golden in color was now black in color."<sup>35</sup> Conversely, a special sheen to the golden body of the Buddha is an auspicious sign. In the *Mahāparinibbāna sutta*, Ānanda notes that the Buddha is particularly glowing; even the precious gold cloth that Ānanda drapes over the Buddha looks dull by comparison. The Buddha tells Ānanda that his body is especially radiant at two particular times, when he achieves Enlightenment and when he is about to pass into Nirvāṇa.

Adjectives and similes that refer to the Buddha reflect the importance accorded his golden body color; they often denote light and emphasize his radiance. Thus, in the first chapter of the *Lalitavistara* rays come forth from the Buddha and from those light rays comes a voice telling the gods to take refuge in the Buddha. Many of the adjectives refer to light. The Buddha is *jñānaprabha*, has the light of knowledge, *hatatamasam*, the one who has destroyed the darkness, *śubhraprabham*, of pure radiant light (*Lalitavistara* verse 1.1). When the Bodhisattva is about to leave the Tuṣita heaven to descend to earth, no description is given of his person, only of the light that emerges from his body and the miracles it causes (*Lalitavistara* pp. 38–89). When the Bodhisattva rests inside his mother's womb, it is again the luminous splendor of his body that is described. The Bodhisattva is aglow, like a blazing fire on a mountain top that in the darkest part of the night could be seen from a distance of even five yojanas away. He was like gold into which a vaiḍūrya gem is set (*Lalitavistara* p. 50). From the womb, he illuminates the chamber in which his mother is resting; he makes her entire body glow; his light makes radiant the entire palace, and outside the palace every direction is aglow from his splendour, his light, his radiant color (*Lalitavistara* p. 50). In the *Samghabhedavastu*, when the beauty of the newborn Buddha is described it is with this simile: just as a gold coin made of the finest gold from the Jambū river, polished by a skilled goldsmith, and placed on a white blanket is radiant, glows, shines, in just such a way is the Bodhisattva Śākyamuni handsome, pleasing to the sight, comforting to behold. His color surpasses the color of mortals, but is not yet the color of the gods.<sup>36</sup> Those who see the Bodhisattva and later the Buddha only long to see him more; they are never satisfied by one glance. As the Buddha goes on to form a community, it is often the very sight of him that creates in his audience a desire to renounce the world and follow his teaching. The *Samghabhedavastu* along with other texts tells us that what is so compelling about his appearance is his golden color.<sup>37</sup>

The exception to this almost exclusive focus on the Buddha's golden body and the rays of light that proceed from it can be found in Sanskrit hymns that were discovered in East Turkestan. While somewhat unusual, their existence suggests that Buddhists also participated in the devotional culture that produced detailed praises of the god's body. The hymns are fragmentary, but from the verses that remain we can see that the details they provide are entirely consistent with the description of the Jina in the *Aupapātika*. Thus the Buddha's nails are pink (*tāmra*), verse 14 in one hymn, while in a second

<sup>34</sup> *Mūgapakkhajātaka* 538 Bodhisattassa kañcanavaṇṇaṃ sariraṃ hatthena parimadditaṃ padumaṃ viya milātaṃ dubbaṇṇaṃ ahoṣi.

<sup>35</sup> Athassa tāya nīrahārātāya paramakasmānappattakāyassa suvaṇṇavaṇṇo kāyo kālavaṇṇo ahoṣi. *Jātakatthakathā*. Similarly, the *Lalitavistara* p. 186, describes how the villagers, seeing the fasting Buddha, cried out, "The ascetic Gautama is black. The ascetic Gautama is dark".

<sup>36</sup> tadyathā jāmbūnadamayī suvarṇaṇiṣkā karmāraparimṛṣṭā ahaṭe paṇḍukambala upanikṣiptā atyartham bhāsate tapati virocate; evaṃ eva śākyamunir bodhisattva abhirūpo darśanīyaḥ prāsādikāḥ atikrānto mānuṣaṃ varṇaṃ asaṃprāptaś ca divyaṃ varṇaṃ.

<sup>37</sup> In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Lakṣmaṇa has the luster of pure jambūnada gold; he has red eyes and black hair. I hope to make an extensive examination of color on the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the future. 6.019.022a yaś caiṣa dakṣiṇe pārśve śuddhajāmbūnadaprabhaḥ 6.019.022c viśālavakṣaś tāmraḥśo nilakuñcitamūrdhajaḥ. 6.019.023a eṣo 'sya lakṣmaṇo nāma bhrātā prāṇasamaḥ priya.

hymn, his forehead is shining like a blazing fire (8) and his eyebrows are dark like the belly and neck of a cuckoo (*parabhṛtadarakaṇṭhanīle*) (9) (Schlingloff 1955). Āśvaghoṣa in the *Buddhacarita*, 7.56, has a sage describe the face of the Buddha, commenting on his red lips, white teeth, and pink tongue, traits that figure in the list of *lakṣaṇas*. This multi-colored Buddha body also recalls one of the origin stories of the Buddha image, a painting made for King Bimbisāra to present to his friend King Rudrāyaṇa. The painters are unable to capture the likeness of the Buddha, who then causes his shadow to fall on a prepared cloth and instructs the painters to color it in, *raṅgaiḥ pūrayata* (*Divyāvadāna* 37).<sup>38</sup>

Despite these references to the importance of color in the experience of seeing the Buddha, more often the emphasis is on a transfigured world of the gold Buddha body; color becomes inseparable from the phenomenon of light, as light rays of the five colors emanate from the body of the Buddha. In Mahāyāna sūtras gold, silver, and brilliant jewels are everywhere, in the wondrous Buddha lands made of gemstones and the Buddha's miraculous transformations. Thus, in the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa sūtra* 1.17, the Buddha presses his foot down and turns the universe into a gem-studded world.<sup>39</sup> In the *Bhaiṣajyaguruvaidūryaprabhārāja sūtra*, the Buddha land is made of vaiḍūrya gemstones, with gates and walls and palaces and windows of seven kinds of jewels.<sup>40</sup> The Buddha world of Amitābha, Sukhāvati, is also a world of gemstones, of jewel trees, flowers made of jewels, incense holders made of jewels. Indeed, the Buddha tells Ananda that the jewels in Sukhāvati surpass anything that can be seen in the mortal world. The different jewels are of different colors; this is a world of radiant and colorful splendor, and it is described throughout the *Sukhāvativyūha sūtra*.

It was not only in Buddhist texts that color and light are brought together and color comes from glittering gemstones in other-worldly realms. Jain texts describe divine temples of the Jina that are made of gemstones and have images made of variegated jewels. The luminous quality of the gemstones is as important as their color. The palms of the hands and feet of these Jina images are made of gold, while the nails are of aṅka gems encrusted with rubies. Their legs are of gold and their body hair of black gemstones. Lips of coral conceal teeth of crystal; eyebrows and eyelashes are of black gemstones (Granoff 2010, pp. 335–44).

Color and radiance work together to create the magical world of many a palace in Sanskrit literature. King Yudhiṣṭhira's wondrous court in the *Mahābhārata* is made from gemstones taken from a jeweled mountain north of the fabled Mount Kailasa. Its pillars are of gold and it is radiant like the sun, the moon, a blazing fire. Indeed, its light outshines the light of the blazing sun. Surrounded by a rampart of jewels, it is filled with gemstones and riches. The lotus pond has flowers with leaves made of vaiḍūrya gems and stalks made of other jewels (*Mahābhārata* 2.3.16–28). Yudhiṣṭhira's palace is not unlike the palace of Alcinous in the *Odyssey*, which was also said to be radiant like the sun and moon (*Odyssey* VII.82–130 cited in Gage 2005, p. 57.) Another ancient Greek writer of the 3rd c CE, Flavius Philostratus in the *Life of Appolonius of Tyana* II.24, would describe a temple of the sun in Taxila as housing images of gold and bronze, with shining red and gold walls, and a main cult image made of pearls (Flavius Philostratus cited Gage 2005, p. 26). As we saw when we moved from Kālidāsa to Hastimalla, in time descriptions of temples and palaces would grow more and more elaborate; in all the descriptions, not just those of architecture, color and radiance would continue to be inseparable.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> This story makes a neat contrast with the contemporary account of the origin of painting in Pliny the Elder *Natural History*, xxxv, 14. Their painting originates not from color applied to the shadow, but from lines, when the shadow is outlined by a human hand. Reference from (Stoichita 1997, p. 7).

<sup>39</sup> *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa sūtra* 1.17 atha bhagavān pādāṅguṣṭhena imaṃ trisāhasramahāsāhasraṃ lokadhātum parāhanti sma/atha khalu tasmīn samaye 'yaṃ trisāhasramahāsāhasro lokadhātur anekaratnaśatasahasrasaṃcīto 'nekaratnaśatasahasrapratyarpitaḥ saṃsthito 'bhūt/tadyathāpi nāma ratnavyūhasya tathāgatasyānantagūṇaratnavyūho lokadhātus tādrśo 'yaṃ lokadhātuḥ saṃdrśyate sma/tatra sā sarvāvatī parśad āścaryaprāptā ratnapadmaṇiṣaṇnam ātmānam saṃjānīte sma.

<sup>40</sup> vaidūryamayī ca sā mahāpṛthivī kuḍyaprākāraprāsādataraṇagavākṣajālaniryūhasaptaratnamayī, yadrśī sukhāvati lokadhātus tādrśī/tatra vaidūryanirbhāsāyām lokadhātu dvau bodhisattvau mahāsattvau teṣāṃ aprameyāṇām asaṃkhyeyāṇām bodhisattvānām mahāsattvānām pramukhau, ekakaḥ sūryavairocana nāma, dvitīyaś candravairocanaḥ.

<sup>41</sup> Thus, for example, the palace and gardens in Bhoja's *Śṛṅgāramañjarikathā*.



#### 4. Reflections

I have focused on two very limited scenarios in Buddhist and Jain texts, how a story begins and how the main character, the Buddha or Jina, is described. While I think the contrast I have drawn in the texts is clear, the relevance of these observations for how the Buddha or Jina was depicted in art is perhaps less clear. It is also difficult to determine what role the presence or absence of colors in a narrative plays in how an artist depicted the story. To complicate our inquiry even further, we cannot know for sure in which direction the influence flowed, from text to art or art to text or whether our written version of a story was the source that a painter used.<sup>42</sup> Less by way of conclusion and more to stimulate future discussion, I offer some reflections on the vagaries of color in art and texts.

It may be fortuitous that one of the earliest images of the Buddha is in fact gold, on a gold Kushan coin. Gold images of the Buddha would be made across the Buddhist world. By contrast, we have seen that a canonical description of the Jina did not privilege his golden skin color, and this is paralleled by the images. While the marble images of the Jina made in Gujarat and Rajasthan seem close to the description of his white flesh, it is just as likely that the choice of stone was driven by the ready availability of marble in the areas in which these images were made. I think we would be rash to conclude that these images owe their existence to a canonical description of the Jina's body.

One of the earliest Jain accounts of the lives of the Jinās is the *Kalpasūtra*. The narrative is rich in descriptions. It begins with the life of the last Jina of our world age, Mahāvīra. A key event in the life of every Jina is his conception, which is marked by dreams that his mother sees. Mahāvīra's mother Trisalā's dreams are told in detail and her bedroom chamber and bed are both elegantly described. The senses most emphasized in the description are smell and touch, as the passage lingers on the many types of incense that made the room fragrant, and the lush softness of the bed and its covers. Nonetheless, there is ample color. The walls, ceiling and floor of her room are painted, and light from many different kinds of jewels dispels the darkness. There are fragrant flowers of five colors. The bed has a red coverlet and a red netting, that the commentary describes as a mosquito net (*Kalpasūtra* p. 52). The color that is explicitly mentioned in the description is red, and in fact that is the dominant color of the paintings that illustrate this scene.

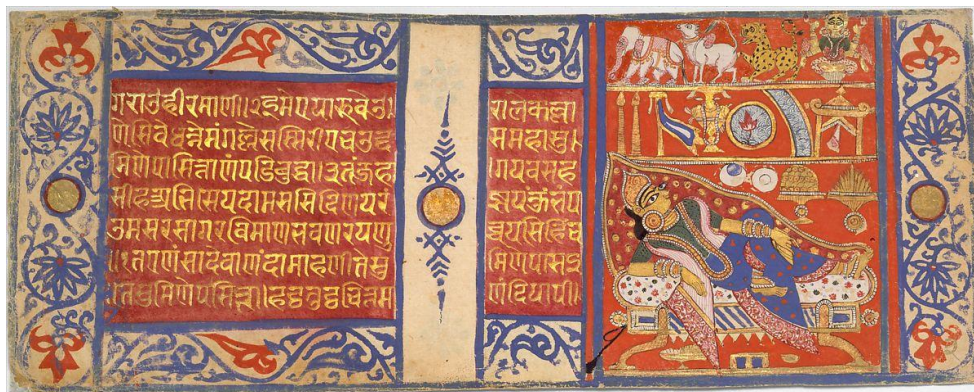
Mahāvīra is first conceived by a Brahmin woman, but the embryo is transferred to the queen Trisalā. The dreams that the two women who conceive him have are identical and are each in technicolor. The first dream is of an elephant that is white, and we get a list of white objects that it surpassed in whiteness, for example the water of the milk ocean, the rays of the moon. The bull that is next seen is also white as is the lion in the next dream. The goddess Śrī has red nails and black body hair; she wears ornaments of gold and has thick black hair on her head. After this, the mother sees a mostly white garland of flowers, surrounded by black bees. Then follow the sun and moon. The flag that is one of the objects of the dream is richly colored; it has a shining gold staff and is topped by peacock feathers of blue, red, yellow and white. On it is a white lion, white like a conch, jasmine, droplet of water, pitcher of silver.

If we turn to the illustrated manuscripts of the *Kalpasūtra*, we see that it might seem as if the painter was not indifferent to the colors of the textual description. On a folio from the Jaunpur *Kalpasūtra*, Figure 4, now in the Metropolitan Museum, the bed cover is distinctively red. The elephant and bull are white, although the garland and the goddess lack the details in the text. But on another manuscript also from Jaunpur, the bed cover is blue not red, something that never appears in the text.<sup>43</sup> Although this is a painting of the newborn Jina Ariṣṭanemi, everything is to be exactly as it was for Mahāvīra. Sometimes the dream objects that are white in the text are gold, as in a *Kalpasūtra* from the Brooklyn

<sup>42</sup> (Green 2018, pp. 180–88) noted the sparsity of detail in the settings in Pali literature. She suggested that the elaborate detail seen in the late paintings may reflect familiarity with Burmese retellings of jātakas, which embellish the Pali stories.

<sup>43</sup> ACSAA Michigan 10396169.

Museum dated 1472 and made in Patan.<sup>44</sup> Color here is an artistic choice in which absolute fidelity to the text is not required; the fashion of the day might have had more to do with the treatment of clothing and furnishings than any of the textual descriptions. Nothing makes this clearer, perhaps, than illustrations of contemporary paintings from the web.<sup>45</sup>



**Figure 4.** Devānandā's dreams. Artist: Master of the Jaunpur Kalpasutra (Indian). Date: ca. 1465. Culture: India, (Gujarat, Jaunpur). Medium: Opaque watercolor on paper. Dimensions: Overall: 4 5/8 × 11 1/2 in. (11.8 × 29.2 cm). Classification: Paintings. Credit Line: Purchase, Cynthia Hazen Polsky Gift, 1992. Accession Number: 1992.359. Metropolitan Museum.

Turning to Buddhism, sometimes a story is remarkably sparse in visual details in the written version and yet paintings of it abound in color and detail. This is the case, for example, with the *Talapattajātaka*. In this story, the Bodhisattva is one of many children born to the king of Benaras. With all those siblings, he wonders if he will ever succeed to the throne. He asks some pratyekabuddhas what will happen to him and they tell him that he will never be a king in Benaras, but that he should go to distant Takkasila and there he will be king. They warn him that along the way he will meet with yakkinīs, demonesses, who use enticements of each of the five senses to seduce travelers. The Bodhisattva has five companions with him and he warns them of the demonesses and urges them to take heed. The yakkinīs first take aim at the person who is easily attracted to objects of sight. They fashion villages and lie in wait. The one of the five who is addicted to seeing beautiful things tells the Bodhisattva that his feet hurt and he needs to rest in a house there. The Bodhisattva and the other four continue on their way and the yakkhinīs eat the poor fellow. Next the yakkhinīs create another house, this one filled with musical instruments. The one who loves sounds stops there and is also eaten. Then the yakkhinīs fashion a market stall filled with rare incense. The one who loves smells stops there and is eaten. They then make a stall filled with pots of delicious foods. This ensnares the companion who is addicted to the pleasures of taste. The last of the five, given over to the delights of touch, is entrapped by soft couches.

The story gives few details of the enticing objects of the senses that the yakkhinīs create and there are remarkably few mentions of color. When the pratyekabuddhas warn the Bodhisattva before he sets out, they tell him that the yakkhinīs will create villages and houses, with luxuriant couches over which hang canopies that are studded with gold stars; around the couches, they create curtains of many colors. This is the most elaborate description of all the yakkhinī creations and it is remarkably brief. The next mention of any color comes after the yakkhinīs have eaten all five of his companions and the Bodhisattva continues to Takkasila alone. One yakkhinī turns herself into a beautiful woman of golden complexion and pursues him. He tells the king she is a demoness, but the king is smitten and

<sup>44</sup> ACCESSION NUMBER 1994.11.23.

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.oshwal.org.uk/14-auspicious-dreams-swapna-of-trishala-mata/>.

marries her. She eats him and everyone else in the palace. The townspeople agree that the Bodhisattva should be king and they paint the palace green and adorn it with garlands, getting it ready for his coronation. The only colors mentioned in the story are gold, of the stars in the bed canopy and the complexion of the demoness, and the green paint of the palace.

By contrast, paintings of this story are exuberant in their colors and details. The 19th century temple at Mulkirigala, Sri Lanka, is famous for its paintings of this story. Figure 5 illustrates the temptation posed by the sense of taste. The painter glories in color—each fruit is brightly colored, red, orange, green, and the background is a vibrant red, against which green ring-neck parrots in the trees feast on hanging orange fruits.<sup>46</sup> It is clear that the painter, although left very much on his own by the Pali text at least, did not suffer for the lack. It is hard to imagine more enticing scenes than those painted here. If the story left us wondering what was so special about the yakkhinī creations, seeing the paintings we are not surprised that the Bodhisattva's companions fell for the yakkhinī tricks.



**Figure 5.** The temptation of taste from the Telapatta Jātaka, Mulkirigala, Sri Lanka, Courtesy Osmund Bopearachchi.

The *Telapattajātaka*, although providing the raw material for centuries of visual depictions, was surprisingly poor in visual details, particularly in mentions of color. Perhaps that was one reason why it had such a long life as the subject of painting and sculpture; the artist was given a satisfying plot but left with the freedom to dramatize it in art. It was not alone in its sparse attention to color. The *Temijajātaka* 538 is the story of a prince who remembers his past births as a king and then in hell for the violence he committed as king. He does not want to be a king again and have to suffer such retribution, for violence is endemic to kinship, as he realizes when he sees his father order the brutal punishment of some thieves. He pretends to be deaf, lame and mute. His parents try to make him walk and talk; they starve him, tempt him with gold toys; they have musicians play night and day and pretty women try to seduce him; an elephant is trained to pretend to attack him and defanged snakes are set upon him to frighten him; they send someone to wave a sword and threaten to cut off his head; they even have his room lit on fire. Nothing can shake him from his steadfast meditation and his resolve to become a monk. His father eventually orders him to be killed, but he shows his

<sup>46</sup> Because earlier painting is so poorly preserved and colors change with age, I have selected recent examples here. For more images, see <https://ranwella.wordpress.com/14-telapatta-jataka/>.



true self to his would-be-executioner and renounces the world. He teaches his parents dharma and they too renounce. The occasions for lively description abound in this story, but as in the *Talapatta jātika* details are few and references to colors are even fewer. The only colors mentioned are gold (the Bodhisattva's body, the toys; his father's sandals), crystal (the sword with which he is threatened, the sand of his hermitage), white (his father's umbrella), and red (his bark garment). Green figures in a simile; the person who longs for the future and laments the past dries up, like a green shoot that has been cut down" (verse 91). Figure 6, a 20th century Thai scroll painting now in the Walters Museum, by contrast, is alive with colors, but not the colors that the written version notes. The Bodhisattva is white, not gold, while the chariot he flips over to show his strength is gold as are the saddles of the horses and his crown and halo. The body of the executioner is red, the expected color of demons, but he and the Bodhisattva both wear the same patterned blue cloth. The sky is tinted red and the ground is blue, colors again picked up by the trees that frame the scene. Color is central to the effect of the painting; like the executioner and the horses, we too focus our attention on the large gold chariot and the white and gold Bodhisattva.



**Figure 6.** Temiya Jātaka, Thai, mid 20th century, Walters Museum mid 20th century (Rattanakosin). MEDIUM; pigments on wood (Painting & Drawing). ACCESSION NUMBER: 2010.12.27. MEASUREMENTS: 15 3/4 × W: 24 in. (40 × 61 cm).

I would add that even where rich visual detail is provided in a text, for example in the *Vessantarajātaka*, paintings and sculptures could sometimes ignore entirely the dense descriptions or use different colors from those specified in the text. The *Vessantarajātaka* has several long descriptions of the hermitage where the Bodhisattva and his family will live and of the forest that the wicked Jūjaka must traverse to find them. The forest is given both a shorter and a longer description. These sections are rich in color references, although sometimes a direct color word is not used and something from nature, the color of which was well known, is named instead. This can be a plant, a flower, an insect or bird. When Maddī insists on following her husband Vessantara into exile, she describes their destination in the Himalayas in vivid language, "as if she had seen it before".<sup>47</sup> In the hermitage, Vessantara will feel no sorrow for the kingdom he has left behind, she tells him, when he sees the

<sup>47</sup> Dīṭṭhapuvvaṃ viya, comment just before verse 1721.



blue-necked peacocks with their many colored feathers dancing (1738–1739); when he beholds the green earth studded with indagopa beetles (1740–1741); when he beholds the bimba trees and the loddapadhdaka in bloom (1742). Indagopa beetles are well-known for their red color as is the bimba flower; lodda flowers are yellow. As the prince departs, his mother laments, recalling the pendants of his soldiers' flags and his soldiers themselves, all of them like kaṇikāra flowers in full bloom, that is, yellow in color. Elsewhere, the forest is described as like a cloud, meaning dark (1909), while some trees are frog-colored. The water of a pond is the color of a veluriya gem (2031), and birds are green, red and white (2075). There are lists of different trees, and one suspects that to a contemporary audience it would not have been just the sounds of the names that were captivating; each tree would have brought to mind a color. One might compare the list with similar lists in the *Mahābhārata*, for example, that name the trees of the forest. I have added their colors. There are campaka (yellow), bakula (white), pumṇāga (white with yellow and pink), ketakī (yellow), paribhadra (red) and karañja (white with purple).<sup>48</sup> Indeed, such forests are alive with color.

The enthusiasm of the written text for this vast forest world is not always shared by the visual artist. The well-known relief of the *jātaka* at Sanchi depicts the hermitage, but ignores entirely the forest. Even a cursory look at paintings suggests that even when the forest was depicted the painter or perhaps a given tradition of painting created its own palette. Figure 7, a scroll from Thailand, now in the Walters Museum, has a section that shows the wicked Jūjaka as he makes his way through the forest to find the Bodhisattva and get his children to be his servants. The painting is faithful to the textual description of the forest with trees and birds and a lotus pond, but its muted colors are not the colors the text imagines. For all the values assigned to colors in a wide range of texts and the prominence of color in written texts, it seems that for these visual artists color had a life of its own.



**Figure 7.** Vessantara Jātaka scroll, Walters Museum. Thai (Artist). PERIOD: 1st half 20th century (Bangkok). MEDIUM: pigments on cloth (Painting & Drawing). ACCESSION NUMBER: 35.288. MEASUREMENTS: H: 96 1/16 × L: 36 in. (244 × 91.5 cm).

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### List of Images

1. Lokeshvara Khasarpana form of Avalokitesvara  
late 11th century

<sup>48</sup> 04,005.002d\*0134\_001 campakāṇ bakulāṃś caiva puṃnāgāṇ ketakīś tathā. 04,005.002d\*0134\_002 pāribhadrāṇ karañjāṃś ca anyāṃś ca vividhāṇ drumāṇ.

India, Nalanda, Pala Period  
(c.750–c.1200)

Steatite

Overall: 7.7 cm (3 1/16 in.)

The Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund 1991.155

Cleveland Museum of Art

2. Avalokitesvara from an Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita

Period: Pala period

Date: early 12th century

Culture: Bengal, eastern India or Bangladesh

Dimensions: Page: 2 3/4 × 16 7/16 in. (7 × 41.8 cm)

Image: 2 1/2 × 1 15/16 in. (6.4 × 4.9 cm)

Credit Line: Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 2001

Accession Number: 2001.4451

Metropolitan Museum

3. Telapatta Jātaka from Mulkirigala, Sri Lanka, courtesy Osmund Bopearachchi.

4. Devānandā's dreams

Artist: Master of the Jaunpur Kalpasutra (Indian)

Date: ca. 1465

Culture: India, (Gujarat, Jaunpur)

Medium: Opaque watercolor on paper

Dimensions: Overall: 4 5/8 × 11 1/2 in. (11.8 × 29.2 cm)

Classification: Paintings

Credit Line: Purchase, Cynthia Hazen Polsky Gift, 1992

Accession Number: 1992.359

5. The temptation of taste from the Telapatta Jātaka, Mulkirigala, Sri Lanka, Courtesy Osmund Bopearachchi

6. Temiya Jātaka, Thai, mid 20th century, Walters Museum mid 20th century (Rattanakosin)

MEDIUM

pigments on wood

(Painting & Drawing)

ACCESSION NUMBER

2010.12.27

MEASUREMENTS

H: 15 3/4 × W: 24 in. (40 × 61 cm)

7. Vessantara Jātaka scroll, Walters Museum

Thai (Artist)

PERIOD

1st half 20th century (Bangkok)

MEDIUM

pigments on cloth

(Painting & Drawing)

ACCESSION NUMBER

35.288

MEASUREMENTS

H: 96 1/16 × L: 36 in. (244 × 91.5 cm)

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