Monsoon Mood

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Picture this: A string of horses wade through a gray river. There are riders on their backs. In the middle is a king draped in white robes. His horse is belly-deep in water. His own legs lost beneath the current.

Dipti Khera: You can see how the artist has painted the water as, like, splashing near the body of the horse, right? So, you get that sense of movement.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Dipti Khera. She's an associate professor of art history at New York University and one of the curators of an exhibition tucked away in an underground gallery of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art, which, by the way, is where we are. Standing in front of a massive watercolor, almost six feet across, it shows a scene from the late 1800s, in Udaipur, India. Behind the riders, green hills rise up in the distance. But the sky above is foreboding. A golden streak of lightning snakes across the painting, darting in and out of swirling charcoal clouds. Vertical streaks of rain pour down.

Dipti Khera: In every texture here, the texture of the water that is, like, flowing in waves, the vertical texture of the rain that is lashing, the streak of the lightning, the kind of thick cloudy texture of waterlogged clouds.

Lizzie Peabody: The whole painting feels wet.

Dipti Khera: Yeah. You are soaked. You, as a viewer, are in a position of being in this soaked land.

Lizzie Peabody: And, honestly, it doesn't look like a great place to be. The landscape looks completely flooded.

Lizzie Peabody: You can see the water is halfway up the houses. It's halfway up the doors and windows. I mean, this looks like a bad situation to me.

Dipti Khera: So, on first glance, this seems that there's some catastrophe. That they are kind of wading through this water, this entire contingent.

Lizzie Peabody: And for a long time, people thought it was a catastrophe.

Dipti Khera: It was always labeled as "crossing the river during a flood."

Lizzie Peabody: But Dipti and her colleagues took a closer look. Examining the painting, she found an inscription on the back, translated it, started looking at poems and other paintings from Udaipur.

[MUSIC]

Dipti Khera: And it's as we started investigating this painting and researching it further that one realized that it's actually not a flood.

Lizzie Peabody: Dipti discovered that, even with houses submerged, rivers overflowing their banks, and rain gushing from the sky, this was not the scene of a natural disaster. So, what was going on in this painting?

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This time on Sidedoor, we are getting our feet wet in an exhibition that explores 200 years of monsoon paintings from Udaipur, India, a place with a special connection to rain.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: How can these paintings give modern researchers a window into the past to help better understand the future of our changing climate? And how did one king's rebellion against conventional art make this possible?

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: That's coming up after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Let's leave the stormy landscape of Udaipur in 1893 and journey back over 200 years to another painting that may not appear surprising at first.

Debra Diamond: This little lovely is a small painting, the kind of painting on paper that you would pick up in your hand and look at very closely.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Debra Diamond, curator for South Asian and Southeast Asian art at the National Museum of Asian Art. And I love the way she talks about this little watercolor painting on paper from around 1690.

Debra Diamond: At the very center of this dark gray and indigo inky rainstorm, there's a little luminous figure of a prince just wearing a pair of shorts, wearing his shield on his head as a kind

of umbrella. We can see the rain, like, pinging off of his shield, dripping down his neck, coming down in rivulets of the back of his wrap, and drenching the ground. And his feet are kind of squidging in the, in the mud.

Lizzie Peabody: Debra says, for an Indian prince to be shown like this—squidging along in his bare feet—would have been really unusual in the late 1600s. The prince is all alone in the dark, his little gold dagger tucked into his pants, shield over his head, rain dripping from his clothes. It's the intimacy of this portrait that makes it so different for its time.

Debra Diamond: When we think of royal portraits that come out of the courts of India, we usually get these very formal images that present kings as powerful and protective. But this is a picture of a prince all alone on a dark night, hardly dressed. It's a very intimate look at someone sort of walking through the rain. And we get the sense that he's enjoying, actually, getting drenched on this hot monsoon night.

[MUSIC]

Debra Diamond: I don't think it hurts that the prince is really adorable. I have to say.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This little luminous, squidging cutie pie is, in fact, Prince Amar Singh, son of the king of Udaipur, India, in the late 1600s. And Debra says, at the time this painting was made, the prince was in that classic phase of teenager-dom—getting in a fight with your parents and getting exiled from the royal court. We've all been there.

[MUSIC]

Debra Diamond: He's in a sort of quasi-exile from the kingdom. He had some kind of argument with his father. And he's living in a small town.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And while living in that town outside Udaipur, Prince Amar Singh meets a fellow rebel, an artist who is pushing the boundaries of Hindu court painting. Because, prior to this…

Debra Diamond: The style was much more abstract. It was idealized.

Lizzie Peabody: Like, a painting of the monsoon might show a peacock or a stylized cloud, icons that symbolize rain.

[MUSIC]

Debra Diamond: But here, we get a sense of an artist using his pigments in a really wet way. I mean, the clouds look wet. He clearly turned the paper this way and that way to let those slatey grays and indigo sort of pool up just as if it was water. And then, he must have taken his brush and flicked it across the surface to get all these raindrops of different sizes.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: In 1698, Amar Singh's father dies and the prince becomes king of Udaipur—Maharana Amar Singh II. He returns to Udaipur and he brings with him this sort of revolutionary attitude about what can be expressed in art.

Lizzie Peabody: Tell me if this is, like, an insane comparison. But when I was thinking about, you know, he comes back to, to rule the kingdom and he's had his, like, punk rock moment of rebellion, except, instead of, like, blue hair and a nose ring, he has this little painting of himself walking in the rain.

Debra Diamond: I like it. No, I do. I do. I think it's that different and I think it's that intimate.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: It was customary for kings at that time to have at least one court artist, who, in this period, often painted small scenes glorifying the king, usually, illustrations of Hindu epics and poetry. But Amar Singh II took a different approach. He wanted scenes of real life, things going on around the palace. He and his courtiers picnicking in a garden, throwing color on each other at the festival of Holi, rescuing an elephant from a well, hunting tigers.

[MUSIC]

Debra Diamond: They celebrate the beauty of Udaipur, the prosperity of the kingdom, but also, they build those interpersonal bonds.

Lizzie Peabody: So, it's almost like they're creating a kind of a royal scrapbook of "our favorite moments."

Debra Diamond: Yes. I think it's very much like that. Although scrapbook only is a little bit misleading because some of these paintings are seven feet across.

Lizzie Peabody: Okay. I don't know. A scrap-mural.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: That was another thing Amar Singh changed. Artwork got bigger. I mean, how are you supposed to fit a king and all of his friends and all the elephants having a picnic on an 8.5 by 11 sheet of paper?

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[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Once finished, it's likely that these large cloth paintings would be laid out on a low table or the floor.

Debra Diamond: And that together, the courtiers looked at the paintings of those events and then they would recount them, and then a scribe would write them down. So, they become part of just like a scrapbook, cementing memory that you can return to it again and again.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, Amar Singh II's interest in a less idealized, more realistic artistic representation combined to create a new genre of painting. But these paintings went beyond documenting royal kickball tournaments. They were meant to evoke an emotional connection to that time and place. A communal nostalgia, a collective mood.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: This idea of mood is central to traditional India art dating back centuries, from dance, theater, poetry, painting, podcasts. Okay. Maybe not podcasts. The idea is that art is defined by the mood it creates in you. And there's a name for it—"bhava."

Dipti Khera: Quite literally, "bhava" means "feel, mood, emotion.

Lizzie Peabody: This is Dipti Khera again.

Dipti Khera: And it's through this development of certain emotions that you arrive at the ultimate aesthetic experience. Something that you feel on your tongue, that you feel in your mouth, right? So, something that you feel with your entire body.

Lizzie Peabody: Wow. So, it really does frame what a work of art is about or what it's for in terms of how a viewer receives it in the case of a painting.

Dipti Khera: Yeah.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Now, how a work of art makes you feel in your body depends a lot on the context in which you're seeing it. And a lot of that context is cultural. For example, let's go back to that little handheld painting of Prince Amar Singh walking in the rain.

Dipti Khera: And it's a painting in which you can think that, actually, the mode in which the painter experiments with water that is on the clouds, that is on the ground, that is on the body, that's bursting around the skin, it's almost as if rain is the primary subject more than the portrait.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Now, as an American, when I think rain, I think dreariness. Like "guy trudging along on sidewalk get sprayed by New York City cab." But Dipti says this could not be more different in parts of India where the monsoon season can last for months.

Dipti Khera: Within the Indian calendar system, you have two seasons that overlap with the monsoon months—July and August and August and September. This is the time when lovers are together. This is not the time for someone to be away, right?

Lizzie Peabody: The monsoon season evokes feelings of romance, togetherness, or longing for a lover who is away.

Dipti Khera: That is very much tied to the question of the longing for the arrival of rains, as well. We are talking about very hot summer months. So, you're waiting for the moisture to come to displace the dry heat.

Lizzie Peabody: This feeling of anticipation, waiting for the rains like you would wait for the return of a lover, is so specific. There's a Hindi word for the smell of the earth moistened by the first touch of the monsoon rains.

Dipti Khera: "Sohndi khushbu." That's, really, the first smell when the water when the rainwater when the rain touches the soil and soaks the soil. So, it's made into a perfume, as well. Like—.

Lizzie Peabody: What? No way.

Dipti Khera: Yeah. It's something that totally kind of transports me to that joy. Like, I can associate it with nothing but a sense of excitement even today.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And so, in the early 1700s, Amar Singh II's court painters did something new. They combined this traditional idea of mood or "bhava" with huge landscape paintings, documenting life in the kingdom. These paintings brought the viewer to a time, a place, and a feeling. But they did something else, too. Something maybe unintentional. Because they show real people at a real time and a real place, they are full of historical clues.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: When we come back: What are the clues found in these monumental landscape paintings, and what can they teach us today? That's coming up after the break.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: When Amar Singh II assumed the throne in Udaipur around 1700, he brought his new punk rock style to royal artwork. His court artists painted large, detailed landscapes, showing real moments in the life of the kingdom, painted in a way that evoked a specific mood. This created a new kind of documentary artwork, which you can see now at the National Museum of Asian Art, in the exhibition "A Splendid Land: Paintings from Royal Udaipur." Take, for example, this five-foot scene painted on cloth.

Debra Diamond: Almost the entire left half of the painting is dominated by the huge city palace.

Lizzie Peabody: Curator Debra Diamond.

Debra Diamond: We can see the assembled court. And they're watching a crazed elephant run around in the courtyard. That's quite exciting.

Lizzie Peabody: And on the right side, you see the reason for the elephant's excitement. Dark clouds barrel in from the upper corner of the painting. They roll over the mountains in the distance. The river, the lakes.

Debra Diamond: Sweeping scoops of water. And that's kind of where there's a lot of sort of excitement and looseness in the way the artist has approached the paint. I mean, we can see every single little lake and river has foaming water and gushing streams.

Mark Giordano: If you're looking at the painting, if you didn't know anything about it, you might think this is somewhere in the tropics, because it has elephants and green and water. I think the first thing to understand is what you see in the image is not natural. It's a, it's a constructed landscape.

Lizzie Peabody: Mark Giordano is a professor of geography at Georgetown University. He teaches courses on water and agriculture, and he consulted on this exhibition. He says the lake around the palace in this painting—in fact, all the little lakes and ponds we see—are manmade.

Mark Giordano: If you look carefully, you can see that there are small dams that have actually created them. So, it's an artificial water landscape in an otherwise arid environment. The water that came during the monsoon that's sitting in the lake is not just sitting there. It's also slowly seeping into the groundwater system. There's more happening than you can see visually.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Udaipur is hot and dry for much of the year. Think Central Texas. But once a year, in the summer, the monsoon rains roll through and drench the city. And these rains were Udaipur's lifeline. A powerful monsoon meant ample water for drinking, washing, irrigating farmland, and growing crops. But a weak monsoon could mean crop shortages, rising grain prices, political and social unrest in the kingdom. So, a wise ruler knew he needed to make the most of every drop of water the monsoons brought. But how do you make a couple months' worth of rain stretch out over an entire year? Well, it's a little like having a husband who loves Costco. Hypothetically speaking, what happens when he brings home a whole month's worth of groceries. You can't eat all this food now.

Mark Giordano: I think the refrigerator analogy is a good one. You could also think of it as a refrigerator plus the freezer.

Lizzie Peabody: Is the lake the refrigerator and the groundwater the freezer?

Mark Giordano: Yeah. I may use that myself later.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: In Udaipur, making the most of the monsoon rains meant building ponds, lakes, dams, aqueducts, and encouraging citizens to dig wells. By the 1700s, the water infrastructure that turned Udaipur into a vibrant capital city had been in the works for centuries. But it doesn't show up in paintings until Amar Singh II's reign. I asked Dipti Khera.

Lizzie Peabody: So, glorifying the kingdom and all of its technological evolution and the things that made it powerful and gave it its individual identity, that was new.

Dipti Khera: Yes. You're, you're absolutely, you know, precisely describing that. That these landscapes were there. It's in how they turn to them and present them to that world is what is new.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: As a modern-day comparison, Mark says, if you asked someone to do a painting of downtown Washington D.C…

Mark Giordano: I bet they wouldn't put one piece of water infrastructure in their painting, even though there are drains, there's the manhole covers, there's water infrastructure all over it. We totally ignore it. So, I think it also—. By looking at this painting, you can see, "Okay. This was-—. Somebody purposely went out of their way to paint the water infrastructure, because they appreciated how important it was."

[MUSIC]

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Lizzie Peabody: When Mark Giordano looks at the landscape paintings from Udaipur, he can see what most of us probably wouldn't—an extraordinarily well-engineered system of water management. And looking at the exhibition with Mark is a little like paging through a "Where's Waldo?" book, except Waldo is all the different kinds of water infrastructure being used.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Take the painting we began this episode with—the king riding his horse, belly-deep in water. The one that looked like a bad flood. At the edge of the water, Mark points to a tiny wheel that I had not even noticed. In a painting nearly six feet wide, it's the size of my thumbnail.

[MUSIC]

Mark Giordano: And that wheel is clearly at the level of the river that would actually make it work. So, obviously, it was designed to be there. And this is just the high point of the monsoon. And the water is—. It's completely full. The water's flowing over the top like it's supposed to.

Dipti Khera: And you can see that there are banana trees that are growing here. There are different kinds of grasses.

Lizzie Peabody: Back in the gallery, Dipti Khera shows me exactly how the wheel scoops water from the reservoir and channels to the surrounding plants.

Dipti Khera: This is a very lush corner because it's being fed by this water wheel, right?

Lizzie Peabody: What is that little brown thing right there in the distance?

Dipti Khera: Can you see? That's another water wheel.

Lizzie Peabody: What?

Dipti Khera: It—. Just look at it closely. Come here and see it. You can see that's another water wheel…

Lizzie Peabody: Oh, my gosh. Yeah.

Dipti Khera: … just like that one.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Dipti says this painting was made nearly 200 years after Amar Sing II's reign. But in it, we can find the legacy of his court artists in the grand scale of the painting, the "bhava" or mood of the monsoon rains, the celebration of the greatness of his kingdom in the form of the detailed infrastructure, and on the back of the painting, the scribe's account of what's happening—the king and his entourage on a monsoon inspection.

Dipti Khera: It is actually a celebration of the rains and celebration of human ability to channel that rainwater, to create a sustainable life for the people of this land.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: It's a victory tour.

Debra Diamond: Oh, that's so well said. Yes, this is a victory tour. I'm into that.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: For a long time, the giant landscape scenes unique to Royal Udaipur in the 1700s weren't given much attention by art historians who treated them as royal portraits. The stuff happening around the king was just filler. But in the process of putting together this exhibition, Debra and Dipti turned their attention to the landscape itself.

[MUSIC]

Debra Diamond: We learned that the paintings actually are like an archival source of information.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Using satellite mapping, translated inscriptions, and consulting with climate scientists, Dipti Khera and Debra Diamond have discovered just how accurately these paintings depict the landscape.

Debra Diamond: It's always so uncanny to look at Google Earth and see, like, the exact course of rivers running through these landscapes.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: And that enables us to look at these paintings today not just as artwork but as data.

[MUSIC]

Dipti Khera: As a new kind of data, I think we've just started to scratch that surface.

Lizzie Peabody: Thanks to one king's punk rock style, yesterday's art could be tomorrow's science. In fact, these paintings are so informative, Mark has even used them in exams he gives to his students to calculate changes over time.

Mark Giordano: You can look at the painting and see that this is what it's like now and we can calculate the difference. Like, now that it's paved, the system works differently than when the painting was made. And I can make students think about what the difference is.

Lizzie Peabody: It's pretty common to look at art to get a sense of, say, what clothing looked like at a certain time or what was going on architecturally. But rarely do we think of art as a way of measuring changes in the environment. Art can also give us a window into the climate of our ancestors and how it changed their landscape. And this is proving helpful as our own climate changes. Rains are even more unpredictable now than they were in the 19th century Udaipur. Wet places are getting wetter. Dry places getting drier. Some places are getting more rain but at different times of the year. Or maybe rain instead of snow.

Mark Giordano: All of this is a big challenge, but it's also what we do already with water. I see hope, actually, in that we know how to manage variability of water. We don't always choose to do it and we don't always choose to do it at the right time. But we have the, the capacity to do it.

Lizzie Peabody: And as that environment continues to change, Dipti says art has a lot to offer science.

[MUSIC]

Dipti Khera: The thing is that, since we haven't understood until now very well the genre of these paintings. That they are combining various kinds of empirical data and various kinds of emotional data. Art and science are not antithetical to each other. One informs the other.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Art provides a unique lens into relationships of the past. Two hundred years of monsoon paintings in Udaipur help us understand exactly how humans tried to harness the unpredictable beast we call Mother Nature. That there's beauty, danger, sadness, and celebration in the rains or their absence. Perhaps, to confront a changing climate, we can use both science and art to understand the challenges we face and how we faced them in the past.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: "A Splendid Land: Paintings from Royal Udaipur" is organized by the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art in collaboration with the City Palace Museum, Udaipur, administered by the Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation. The National Museum of Asian Art gratefully acknowledges support from members of the "A Splendid Land: Paintings from Royal Udaipur" Leadership Council.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The exhibition is co-curated by Debra Diamond; Elizabeth Moynihan, curator of South Asian and Southeast Asian Art; and Dipti Khera, Associate Professor at New York University, in the Department of Art History and the Institute of Fine Arts.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: The exhibition celebrates the centennial of the National Museum of Asian Art and the 75th year of India's independence. It will be at the National Museum of Asian Art through May 14th. And if you have a chance, go see it. There's just nothing like seeing these paintings in person. Take it from Mark Giordano.

Mark Giordano: These are large paintings, and they make a visual impact on you from a distance. But then, as you get closer, you have to have a magnifying glass to, to appreciate what's going on.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you can't make it to the exhibition in person, we will share images of the paintings we talked about, as well as others from the exhibition, in our newsletter. You can subscribe at si.edu/Sidedoor.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Special thanks this episode to Dipti Khera and Debra Diamond. Thanks also to sound artist and filmmaker Amit Dutt, who created immersive soundscapes that can be heard throughout the galleries of the exhibition. And you've been hearing them throughout this episode, as well. Each gallery features a different sound story inspired by the paintings.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Thanks also to the team at the National Museum of Asian Art: Helena Guzik, Jennifer Mitchell, Mary Mulcahy, and Saronik Bosu.

[MUSIC]

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Lizzie Peabody: Additional music heard in this episode was recorded at the Freer Gallery of Art on May 30, 2003, and features Krishna Mohan Bhatt on sitar; Anindo Chatterjee on tabla, and Richard Skinner on tanpura.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison and me, Lizzie Peabody. Our associate producer is Nathalie Boyd. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant. Tami O'Neill writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Fact-checking by Adam Bisno. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and regular episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: If you want to sponsor our show, please visit sponsorship@prx.org.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC]

Lizzie Peabody: So, what I'm hearing you say is that we know all of these because Amar Singh got mad at his dad.

Debra Diamond: Maybe.

Lizzie Peabody: All right. That's my, that's my thesis statement. In sum, it's healthy for teenagers to rebel. That's the takeaway.

Debra Diamond: That's the takeaway. That's the takeaway.