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Courtship in Indian Miniatures from the Watson Collection

November 10, 2001–January 6, 2002, Mayer Gallery

The annual exhibition of Indian miniatures showcases our ever-popular, intimate and brightly colored miniatures from India of the 17th through 19th centuries. While imagery of lovers and courtship plays a part in the art and literature of all cultures, the images have particular meanings in world of the Indian miniature. The lovers in beautiful costumes and elegant settings suggest all the pleasures that are available in times of abundance. Drought—and its companion famine, ever to be feared in India—is seen as the polar opposite of sexuality. In fact, there is a strong association between imagery of lovers and that of more general fertility. In a wedding ritual, the groom says to his bride “I am the sky; you are the earth,” symbolically taking the parts of the sky father and earth mother to create abundance. In Rajput art the god Krishna and his consort Radha or Shiva and Parvati embody these natural forces; later the king and queen also symbolically bring fertility to the land and stave off drought and famine. Although the Mughal artists employ the same formal conventions of depicting lovers, the ancient indigenous fertility ritual has lost its force.

The artists of these works put an enormous amount of detail into small spaces, and close inspection is required to reveal their tiny nuances. Such paintings were originally created as illustrations for palm-leaf manuscripts and later for sumptuous literary volumes; the small format was preserved when the paintings were collected in albums.

The collection came to the Elvehjem through the generosity of Jane Watson, née Werner, who was born in Fold du Lac in 1915. She graduated from the University of Wisconsin in 1936 with a B.A. in English and worked for Western Publishing Company from 1938 to 1958 as editor and writer. She and her late husband Earnest collected these paintings when he was science attaché to the United States Embassy in New Delhi in 1960–62 and on visits to India for the next few years. The Watsons began donating works from their collection to the University of Wisconsin in 1964, followed with regular donations through the 1980s. The Elvehjem now counts well over 265 outstanding Indian miniatures in its Watson collection.