Chapter 1
Interrupted Continuities: The Chatrīs of the Kachhwaha Rajputs of Amber and Jaipur

Of all the Rajput royal houses, the Kachhwahas of Amber and Jaipur were arguably the wealthiest and most prolific patrons of art and architecture. The dynasty consistently demonstrated political savvy and was among the first to ally with incumbent powers and rising political stars. In the mid-sixteenth century, it was the first Rajput house to ally with the Mughals. Individual Kachhwaha kings enjoyed close relations with the Mughal emperors, to whom they were related through marriage, and held positions of high rank in the imperial army and court. In the early-nineteenth century, the Kachhwahas allied with the British and were their loyal supporters on the international stage. The dynasty’s profuse artistic patronage was funded by wealth gained from these politically exigent alliances, and each phase of Kachhwaha relations with the imperial powers influenced the dynasty’s chatris. As in other cases of Rajput appropriation of imperial forms, materials, styles, and messages of political legitimacy, Kachhwaha royal patrons and their artists selectively adopted and adapted from the Mughal and, to a lesser extent, European artistic repertoires. Perhaps no Rajput dynasty was more adept at appropriating from Mughal art for its political gain than the Kachhwahas. While scholars have examined the Kachhwahas’ politically motivated debt to the Mughals in their painting1 and sacred and secular architecture,2 Kachhwaha chatris have not been included in this dialogue. As with their art in other media, many Kachhwaha chatris convey their patrons’ dual identities as dharmik Hindu kings and dutiful subjects to their imperial overlords.

The Kachhwaha king is the head of the clan, which also includes the Narukas of Alwar and the Shekhawats of Shekhawati. The oldest extant Kachhwaha

2 In addition to “Architecture of Raja Man Singh” and “Kachhwaha Pride and Prestige,” see Catherine Asher’s “Sub-Imperial Palaces: Power and Authority in Mughal India,” Ars Orientalis 23 (1993): 281–302; and “Rethinking Communalism: Kachhwaha Rajadharma and Mughal Sovereignty,” in Rethinking a Millennium: Perspectives on Indian History from the Eighth to the Eighteenth Century: Essays for Harbans Mukhia, ed. Rajat Datta (New Delhi: Aakar, 2008), 22–46. Also, Asher and Cynthia Talbot, India before Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2006), 148–51.
capital is Amber, where they ruled from the sprawling Amber Fort, perched atop a rocky escarpment and begun under Rājā Man Singh I (r. 1592–1614). Several lavishly carved temples they commissioned still stand in the now-sleepy town below. Also in Amber is the Kachhwahas’ first chatri bagh, dating to the early-sixteenth century. When in 1727 they relocated their capital to the nearby planned city of Jaipur, they built a second chatri bagh nearby, at Gaitor.

With so much wealth, power, and prestige at stake, the Kachhwaha court has been fractured over the centuries by internal conflicts: in particular, three contentious royal successions. Each of the Kachhwaha kings involved in these succession skirmishes—Ishwari Singh (r. 1743–50), Madho Singh I (r. 1750–68), Madho Singh II (r. 1880–1922), and Man Singh II (r. 1922–69)—adamantly announced his right to occupy the throne through the formal and decorative programs of the chatri he commissioned for his predecessor. Each of these chatris is remarkable for its radical formal and decorative divergences from earlier Kachhwaha cenotaphs, and the Kachhwaha chatris at Jaipur offer, along with the chatris of the Jodha Rathores of Marwar, some of the most conspicuous formal and decorative variations within a single Rajput dynasty.

As mentioned in the introduction, when a king in the former Rajput kingdoms came to office amidst controversy—power struggles between the surviving princes, a royal adoption, or the dynasty’s forced concession to an outside power—he as a general rule commissioned a chatri for his father that was large and ambitious, with a politically meaningful formal and decorative program. Thus a very specific message would be visually announced through the chatri’s form and decoration, and amplified through its scale. New Rajput kings whose rules were not threatened, by contrast, seldom made particularly innovative chatri patrons.

Writing in relation to how those in power manipulate visual and performative rhetoric as a means of legitimizing their authority, and how political crisis is abrogated through the exploitation of symbols, anthropologist and political historian David Kertzer comments:

Dramatic discontinuities threaten the integrity of any political organization. In the face of such a threat, potent symbolic means must be used to legitimate both the changes and the power holders responsible for them. Where the changes are made by a new power leadership, this may be done by discrediting some of the old symbols of legitimacy ... Even in such cases, however, great emphasis is given to symbolic continuity ... Where a sharp change in policies takes place, with the same leadership at the helm, leaders avoid attacking the old symbolism associated with past policies; rather, they attempt to expropriate those same symbols for their