

# Tantra Song

Tantric Painting from Rajasthan

Selected and with writings by

Franck André Jamme

Translated by Michael Tweed

With

an introduction by Lawrence Rinder

an interview by Bill Berkson and an essay by André Padoux

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## INTRODUCTION

Lawrence Rinder

I have a place in the country. I doubt there's anything truly special about it: it's just a little piece of California countryside, nothing more. Yet, at that place, when I can look at a tree, a constellation of stars, or even just a small patch of ground, it looks wonderful and strange. I have little idea what I am looking at, even though I might be able to give it a name, or perhaps recall some principle of nature that has made it as it is. What I see is color, texture, shape. I see energy, evidence of change, and the transforming powers of life and death.

Franck André Jamme's collection of Tantric images affects me in a similar way. Just little scraps of paper really with barely a mark upon them. Simple. Anonymous. Repetitive. But utterly riveting. I can't begin to say what these images are. I know virtually nothing about the tradition from which they spring. I sense that they are in some way technical and have a use in that tradition which is tool-like and, in some spiritual way, pragmatic. My fascination with them is likely as confused as that of the Hindu adepts who not long ago chose to enshrine a parking barrier in San Francisco, finding in it an echo of the divine. In these divine images, I find an echo of art.

It helps that I have a very broad definition of art, one that could even include those engrossing patches of bark, soil, and sky. Maybe art isn't quite the right word: let's call them experiences that ground us in the real, images that cut to the quick of what we might be. Obviously, things like this need not have an origin in human intent and certainly don't require skill as commonly understood nor, for that matter, professional acumen. They have to have something but it is impossible to describe what that is. We can call it beauty.

I have noticed in the Tantric works how the simplicity of their conventional, geometric forms is complemented by the infinite complexity of their particular execution: water stains, flaws in the handmade paper, fragments of unrelated text combine to make each work not only unique but somehow perfect. These images would clearly not have the same power if they were drawn on a computer and digitally printed. It's not just a desire for the antique or a nostalgic patina that makes the incidental marks so important, it's precisely that ideal forms—forms plumbed from the depths of the mind, of the soul—need to co-exist with randomness and the emptiness of chance. How is it that a symbol of god

alone is so dull, but when juxtaposed with a smudge or a smear it comes alive? Ever since I moved to the country I've fantasized about sleeping at night in the woods, with a blanket maybe but nothing else to separate me from the world and the life around me. I haven't done it, but I see in these Tantric images what such exposure might feel like and what awareness it might lead to.

I first saw Franck's collection of Tantric art in the mid-1990s at a sidewalk café in Paris. I was on my way to India and I had contacted Franck to get his recommendations on artists to see. He brought along a portfolio of small paintings which, when opened, had the alarming effect of making Paris vanish. Of course, I asked Franck how I could find some in India and find the people who make them. He gave me some tips, directing me to Rajasthan and providing me with a couple of names. The search led me to Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Jaiselmer, to old markets and dusty back rooms. I found some marvelous Jain pieces, but nothing approaching the lucidity of the works in Franck's collection.

The closest I came to touching something like a point of origin was at a rendezvous with the director of the Museum of Indology in Jaipur. The old fellow, Acharya Vyakul, was himself a *tantrika* and exceptionally cagey about the type of thing I was looking for, although he had some related works on view in his jumbled display cases. It wasn't until well past midnight that he revealed that he had some pictures I might like to see, paintings he had done himself. They were not as precise as Franck's and departed at times from conventional forms. Yet they had some spirit in them and I acquired three for my museum. Ultimately, I'm afraid that I fall into the category of foreigners who Franck has known who, "went too quickly over there—apparently because they didn't have the time."

Subsequently, though, I've had the pleasure of including works from Franck's collection in several exhibitions and I feel that some of these images are becoming old friends: the azure field covered with a thousand cattywampus arrows, the coal-black Shiva linga, the eye-like spirals in an oval of yellow, the "image" that is nothing but a square of chalky white enclosed by a vermillion line. I have come to see young artists' works inspired by these images, drawn to their directness, elegance, and profound lack of posture. Something of the nature of these works has become part of the fabric of the art culture of my community. They guide us like stars we don't need to go outside to see.



## OF IMAGES & BEAUTY

André Padoux

The Tantric religious world is a world of images: sculptures in temples, likenesses of gods or goddesses used in ritual, statues, paintings, mandalas, or diagrams of all sorts. A visual world and a world of visions, of seeing: in temples, the devotee seeks the *darshan* of the deity, that is, seeing and being seen by it. But the ritual, too, is a visionary world, of images mentally evoked, perceived in oneself or mentally projected onto a support, be it the image of a god, an abstract icon, or a linga. Of every ritual element or notion there can be a perceptible form. Even mantras, insubstantial by nature since they are word or sound, uttered or mentally evoked, may have a visible aspect—that of the deity of which they are the essence—an aspect that the adept often “sees” mentally when using the mantra. Seeing and saying, in that case, coincide, supporting one another. In point of fact, the Sanskrit stanzas which reveal (usually in an arcane, diagrammatic fashion) the syllables which constitute a mantra—they are called *dhyānashloka*s, stanzas for mental visualization—describe also the aspect of the mantra’s deity (or rather of the mantra which is the deity) that is to be visualized.

Though images are ever present in ritual or asceticism, theirs is not a field for creative imagination: the imagining adept or devotee “sees” in spirit only what the texts prescribe. In India, whether or not Tantric, one does not freely create divine images; nor does one improvise the mantras which are the phonetic form of these deities. The Hindu maker of divine images is not an artist, but a craftsman, a *shilpin*. A *shilpin* however can be artistically gifted, thus giving birth to beautiful images which, though fashioned according to a canonical set of rules, are able to arouse emotions or even to fill with wonder those who see them. There has always been more freedom in painting than in sculpture: Hindu miniature (or fresco) paintings of deities are quite often beautiful works of art (as we would say). Such is the case of the abstract images from Rajasthan that we see here: drawn according to rules, they are nevertheless aesthetically attractive.

The sensitivity to sensual beauty is a fundamental Indian trait. The aesthetic and the metaphysical or religious experiences tend often to coincide at their apex with an overwhelming experience of ecstatic wonder (*chamatkāra*, in Sanskrit). This coincidence is especially visible and stressed in the Tantric domain: was not the main Indian theoretician of aesthetics the great Tantric philosopher, yogi and mystic Abhinavagupta (c.

975-1020, C.E.)? Tantric ritual worship is a complex ensemble of actions bringing together and arousing all of the bodily and mental powers of the officiating person in an ascending movement of identification with the deity, where the aesthetic aspect of the ritual—the incense, the flowers, the offerings, the play of gestures and bodily attitudes (the *mudras*)—increase by their efficacy, their charm and beauty, the devotion of the performer (who, at the same time, is also entranced by the cosmic elements he is to imagine as present in the icon). All these factors create an atmosphere of devotion around the abstract forms, lingas, or diagrams used for worship, thus becoming active elements of this identifying ritual *mise en scène*. The colored abstract forms from Rajasthan shown here were in all likelihood not used for such a complex ritual worship—though, why not? But they surely were the supports of visionary imaginative processes. They are things of beauty, “a joy forever,” and thus very much capable, we may believe, to become supports of cosmic visions. They would also have been, when most abstract, the starting point of aniconic meditations. Some include a dot, a *bindu*, which, in Tantric metaphysics and cosmogony, is the symbol of the undifferentiated absolute, both holding within itself the whole cosmos and transcending it: to concentrate on this focal point is to “see the world in a grain of sand” and to transcend it, to open, that is, one’s soul both to the plenitude and to the absolute pure void—*shunya*—of the supreme deity, invisibly present in such abstract symbols, to be reached and experienced through and by transcending them.



## INTERVIEW WITH FRANCK ANDRÉ JAMME

Bill Berkson

Bill Berkson: How did you first discover this type of Tantric art?

Franck André Jammé: Well, very first in a small catalogue from an exhibition held in 1970 at Le Point Cardinal Gallery in Paris. At a bookseller's stall, a few years later, the names of Henri Michaux and Octavio Paz (who had supplied a poem and a short essay, respectively, to the thin volume) drew me like a magnet. There were also some books by Ajit Mookerjee. All that I found in Paris. Then, later, in 1982, I went to Nepal and on the road I actually stopped for a short week in India, hoping I could see and perhaps find some of these abstract Tantric paintings. I saw the "Mookerjee Room" in the National Museum of Art in Delhi but I couldn't find any pieces. In fact I just wanted to go to Nepal because I was very interested in Tibetan people, loved Milarepa and Drukpa Kunley (a major author of medieval Himalayan culture, from Bhutan). Frankly, I was not interested in this particular school of Buddhism, but rather in the physical and cultural similarities between the Tibetans and North American Indians, for example their folk dances, shamanic practices and even the fact that some Tibetan men actually look like Geronimo or Cochise. It was just before I helped René Char edit his complete works. In fact René offered me this trip. He was also a Milarepa fan and he loved the idea of going to see the Tibetan people. At that time, entry to Tibet was forbidden and the only way was to go to Nepal where there were very big camps of Tibetan refugees around Katmandu. René even wanted to come with us—I was married then—but, well, he was just joking.

BB: This was the first of many trips to India for you . . .

FAJ: Yes, so many, more than fifteen now. I made my next trip in 1984. Char's complete works were finished. I stopped for something like two long weeks in India. I seriously tried to find some abstract Tantric paintings. I asked everywhere I could, but in vain. After these two first voyages to India, I decided in 1985 to dedicate a new trip—this time, just in Rajasthan—exclusively to searching for these pieces. I was very curious about them; they were so close to our modern or even contemporary art, from Malevich and Paul Klee to Agnes Martin and Daniel Buren, and many others. It was strange that such

modern, occidental-looking patterns already existed in India during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and they were so simple, so powerful, so quietly and naturally abstract, so near, as well, to my own field, which was already something like poetry. Poetry is so often like that, isn't it? Playing with words, using words in such a natural abstract way.

So I arrived in Delhi, spent four or five days there, and found myself one morning in front of a bus for Jaipur. I immediately felt the bus was not the right one, but I was with my wife and quite a lot of luggage and stress, so reluctantly I decided to board this bus. On the road, thirty kilometers after leaving Delhi, first the driver ran into a small farmer's cart. He argued half an hour with the peasant, finally gave him some bills, and we started off again. By then, the driver was looking really tired; perhaps he had driven his "deluxe" bus for some days without really resting, I don't know. I had chosen a seat in the front row (I wanted to shoot some photos on the road, quietly). Another thirty kilometers later, suddenly I saw a big truck coming from the opposite direction and heading straight toward our bus. After that, I have just bits and pieces of memory. I experienced several comas. Later I learned that I had been brought in another bus—because I had a ticket for Jaipur, I had to go to Jaipur—to the Jaipur General Hospital with nine fractures, and also that seven people around me on the bus had died. I spent two days in this hospital without any special first aid. I remember hearing that the hospital didn't have any anesthetic. Then my wife called the French embassy in Delhi. They sent somebody who put me on one plane Jaipur-Delhi, then another Delhi-Paris, in a sort of hammock. I spent three weeks in a Parisian hospital, then six months at home in a hospital bed. In this bed I wrote the book called *The Recitation of Forgetting*<sup>1</sup> that John Ashbery translated almost twenty years later.

BB: A silver lining to all that darkness . . .

FAJ: Yes—fortunately. But there followed two bad years, not just for my broken body but also for my mind. It was really too difficult to live with the memory of this failure. Like when you have fallen off your horse, the best is to get up and ride again as soon as possible. After many discussions with friends, especially a doctor, I decided to go back to India. I went to a friend in Udaipur. I spoke with him a lot, and he told me that perhaps it would be a good idea to go and see an astrologer and soothsayer whom his family had known for a long time. I went and saw this strange man. He just asked me my astrological coordinates and what I wanted to know. I replied that I just wanted to know if I could try to continue my research on these abstract Tantric paintings. He told me to come back in two days time. When I came back, there was something new in the room, a very big bowl full of sand. He asked me to wash my hands in this sand, and he then read the sand during, you know, fifteen minutes, which seemed to me an eternity. Then he told me something like, "In fact, you are a lucky boy." Here, I'm afraid, I smiled. "You have paid your tribute to the goddess. You can carry on now with your research. You can find some of these paintings, you can discover what they mean, you can show them abroad, you can even sell them. But after what has already happened, we must be very prudent. If you really want to continue your research, okay, but you will have to follow very strictly two rules. First, when you go and visit a *tantrika* family, you must



go only alone or with someone you love—to be clear, for example, not with your best friend or your sister or your new girlfriend. The second caution is regarding the possibility of showing and selling the pieces. You can show and sell them, okay—but for just enough to make your living.” Then he added, “With these conditions you could be of great help to this small, wonderful art, in which so few people in India take an interest.”

Well, that was the end of the meeting. As he walked me back to the door, I thought in quick succession how amazing this gentleman really was, but what could I do with his advice, where would I find the tantrika families? When we arrived on the doorstep, he looked at me, smiled—like a fox, he really had a fox-like face, by the way—and told me, “Well, I think I forgot to give you something.” He asked a young servant who was near to go and fetch a pen and paper. The servant went and came back, and the soothsayer wrote out my two first addresses of tantrika nests. Well, strangely, everything began from that moment. Later, I returned to India, went and visited these first families, who then sent me to another branch of the family or to another family entirely. Pretty much all over Rajasthan. The work was then on course. Afterwards it took, let’s say, ten years to begin to know something, even if only a tiny something, about this amazing art. Especially, to find over the years, by trawling among the statements of numerous tantrikas, the precise meaning of each scheme, each image.

BB: What makes this art so amazing?

FAJ: Well, I think its main particularity is that it is first of all a practice. First for the “artist” himself when he paints a piece, and then for the people who are later going to work on seeing this image, to meditate on it and its meaning—and what is more, through this meditation, finally to make the divinity herself appear. I don’t know if there are many other arts that have those qualities. And, on the other hand, this has not killed the aesthetics, the grace of these things. Tantrism is too free, too open for one not to see, to accept, to appreciate, even to revere the beauty of these paintings. They are now collected also in the western world, but in India that has certainly been true for centuries.

BB: What do you know about the origins of these works and how they have developed over the centuries?

FAJ: Tantrism appeared in India, within Hinduism, around the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century, C.E. In Sanskrit “tantra” means “loom” or “weave,” but also “treatise.” The earliest traces of these paintings have been found in books and treatises dating from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Then, gradually, the images were taken out of the books, to be “worked,” meditated upon, separate from the texts.

The vocabulary of Tantric paintings is somewhat similar to that of *ragas* in Indian classical music. It is unclear when they appeared or who “created” them. Occasionally (a few rare times each century), a brief new musical phrase appears or a new pictorial scheme. However, this all remains quite mysterious. Personally, in such an ego-centered world as ours, I find this anonymity extraordinarily delightful and touching.

BB: What presence has this art had in your own life?

FAJ: A constant presence for thirty years. However, two things should be clear. First, I’m obviously not at all an adept, a tantrika, but there is something they very often do with these paintings that I do myself from time to time—the “visualization.” In this practice, you just stay in front of a piece for say, ten to twenty minutes—I don’t invoke a divinity like they do, my way is raw and very unorthodox. I just focus on what this special piece makes me think of, very freely, but also with a minimum of direction given by the traditional meaning of the piece. And, through the rest of the day, I can now—as the adepts themselves do—re-see it very precisely in my mind when I want to and associate it with the thoughts I had in the morning. It’s actually quite interesting for writing; if I have spent, for example, a time on a piece I finally have come to consider as a specific support for personal divagation on thought and language—I mean, of course, writing in my mind, in the void, without pen, paper, or machine.

Secondly, the funny thing is that I never have had any sort of fixed collection of these pieces myself. There is a constant turnover. I never frame them, or very rarely. I generally just pin them up—in my case, near the table where I work—like they do in India in the Tantric families, but there they put them in a sort of special and “sacred” place in the house, and my desk is of course totally secular.

I keep some for months, until the next exhibition, which is generally not very big, around twenty pieces, sometimes less, rarely more than thirty-five, and there is rarely more than one show per year anywhere in the world, or even less. For the very simple reason that these paintings are so rare. When I think again of all that, I’m astonished, myself. Finally, I needed around twenty years to find the good nests, the good families where people were still making these marvels. And, to be honest, the tale of my accident on the road from Delhi to Jaipur now sounds a bit like a fairy tale—a pumpkin transformed into coach.

And still the astonishment doesn’t let up. At the occasion of the first solo exhibition of these paintings at Galerie du Jour Agnès b. in Paris in 1994, I decided with Agnès to put this notice—a few lines I had written a few days before—on a kind of placard at the entry of the show: *The thought has often occurred to me that, perhaps rarely in the universal history of painting, have works at once so mysterious and simple, yet so powerful and pure ever been produced—a bit as if, here, man’s genius had been able to assemble almost everything in almost nothing.*

Which was very excessive but a bit true, wasn’t it?

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> New York: Black Square Editions, 2003.







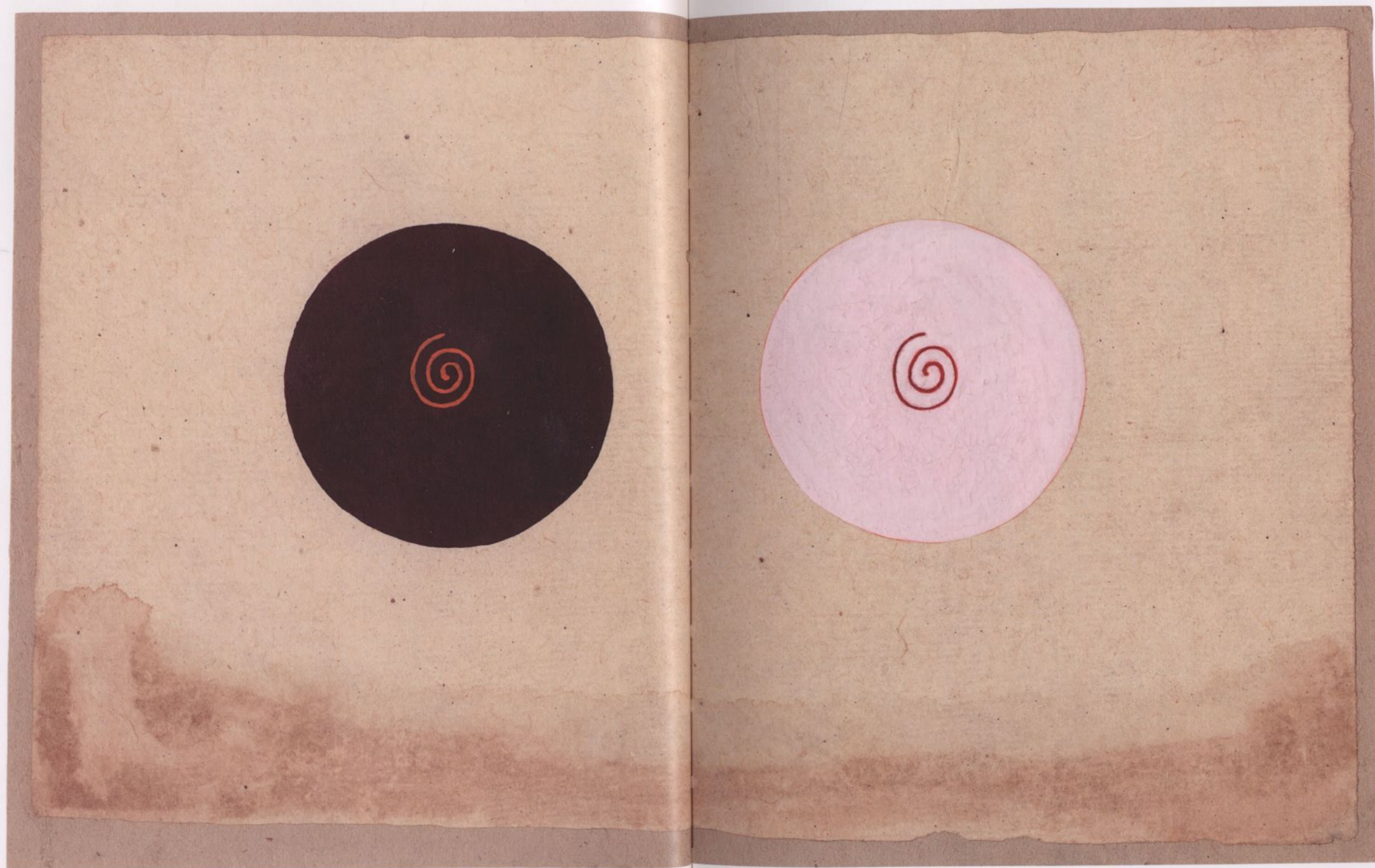
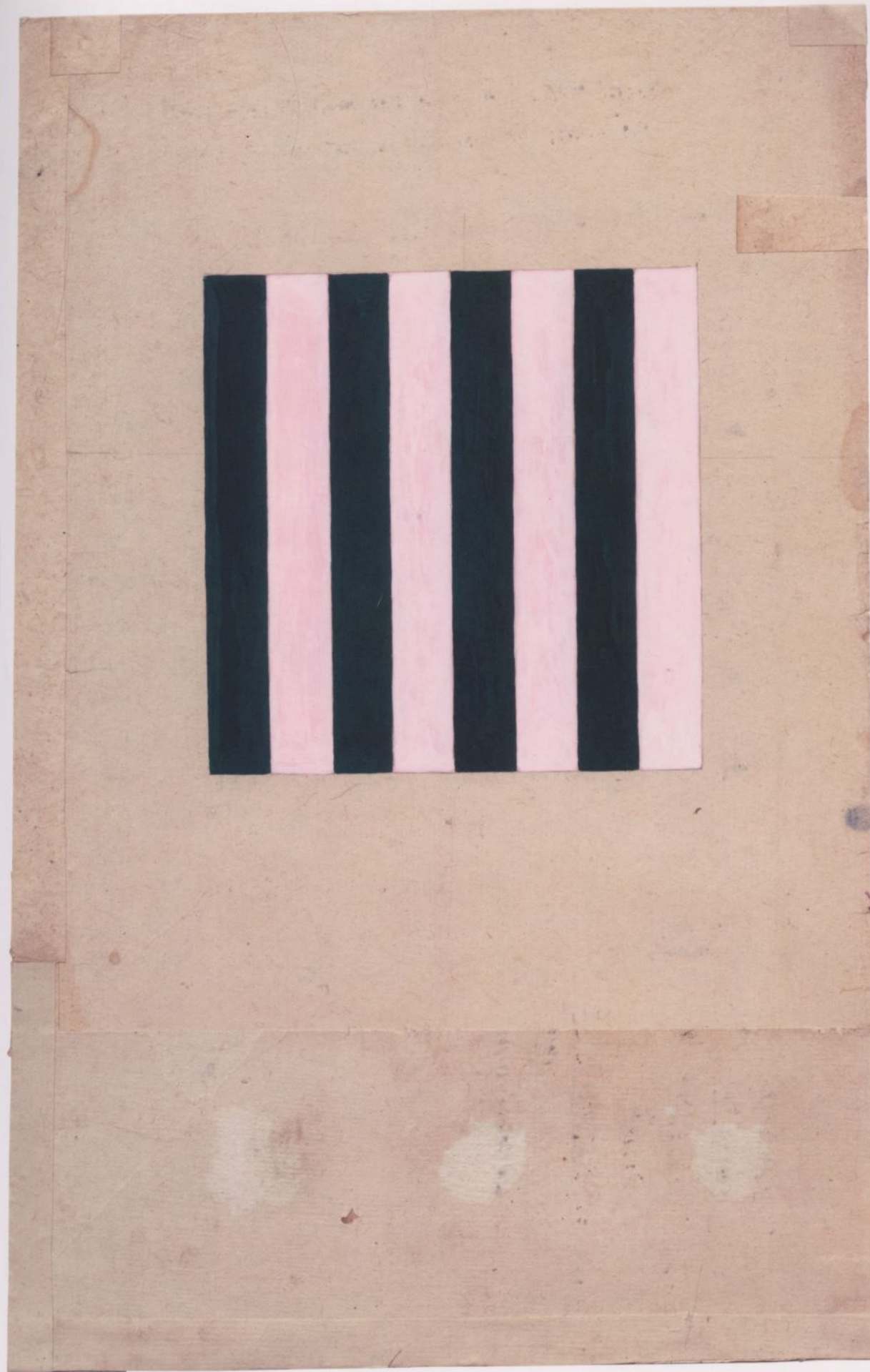
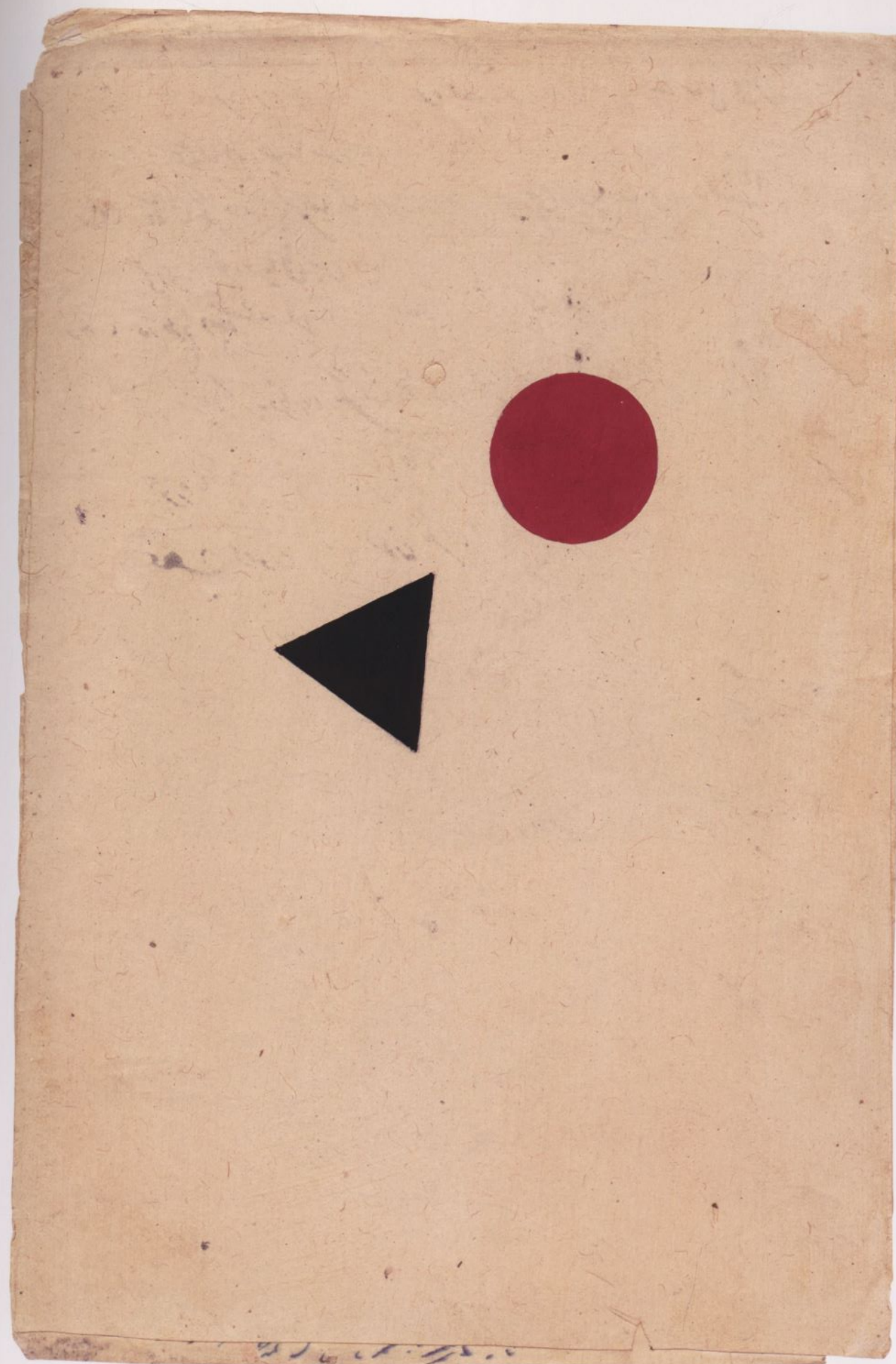




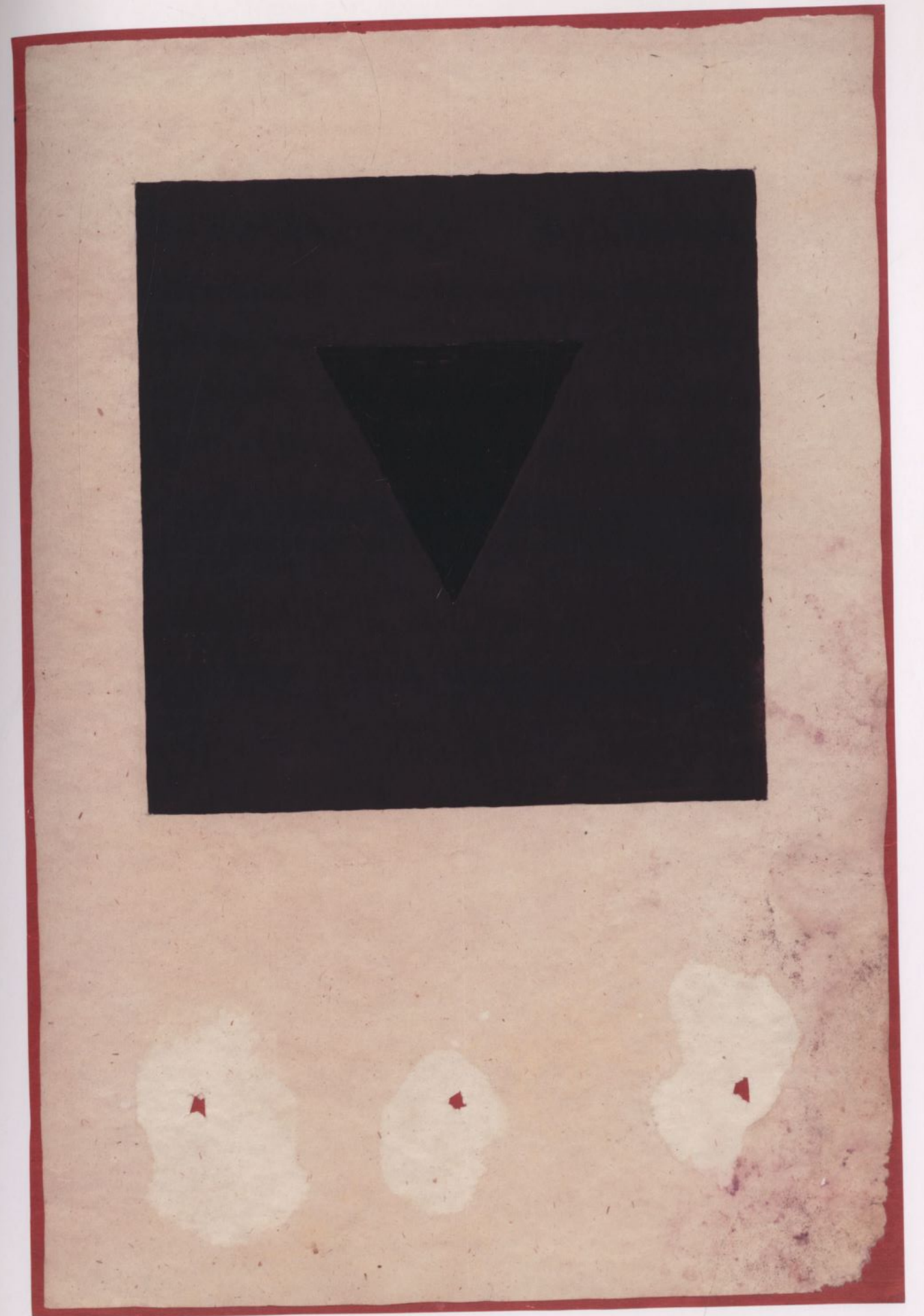
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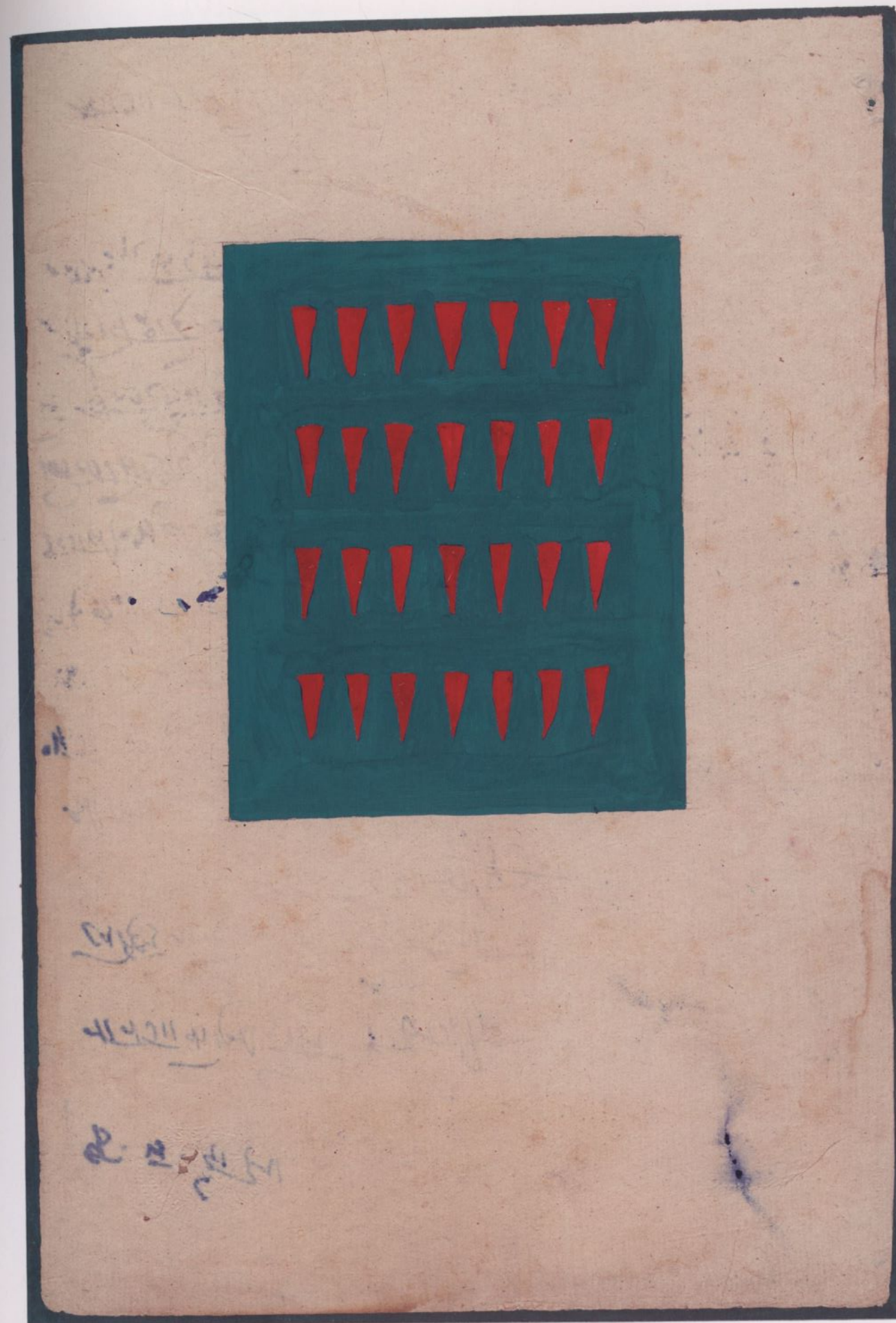




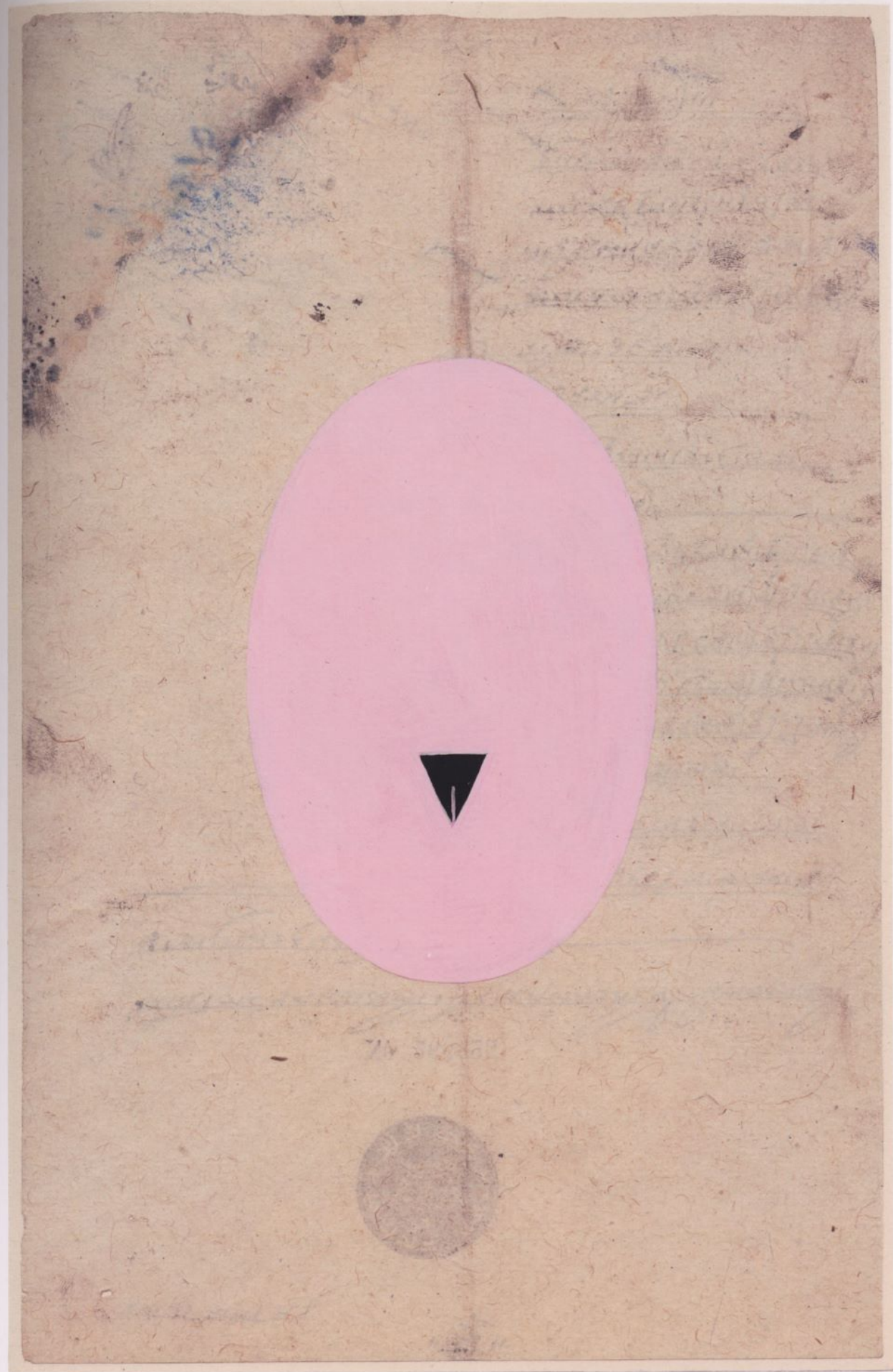
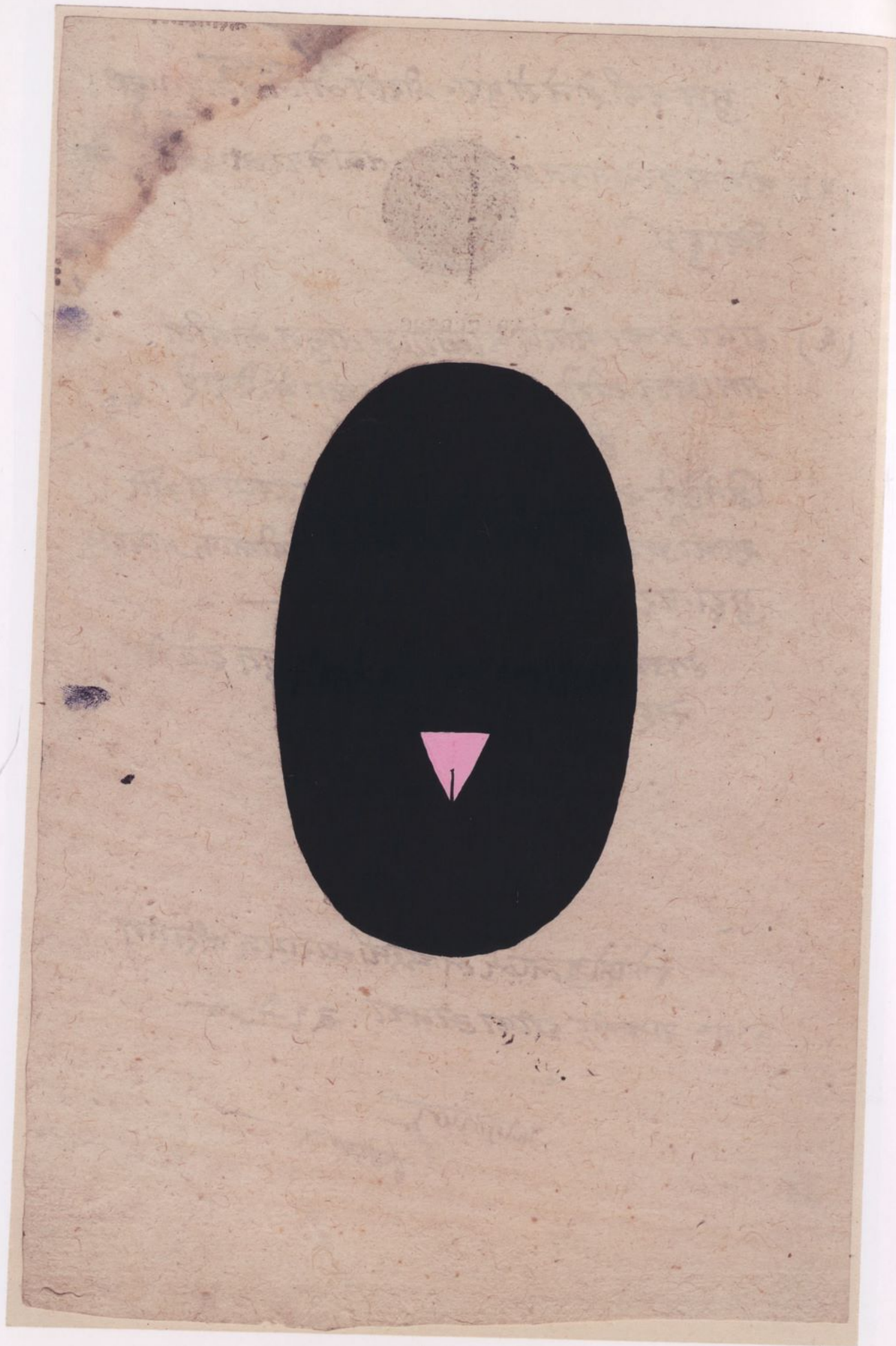














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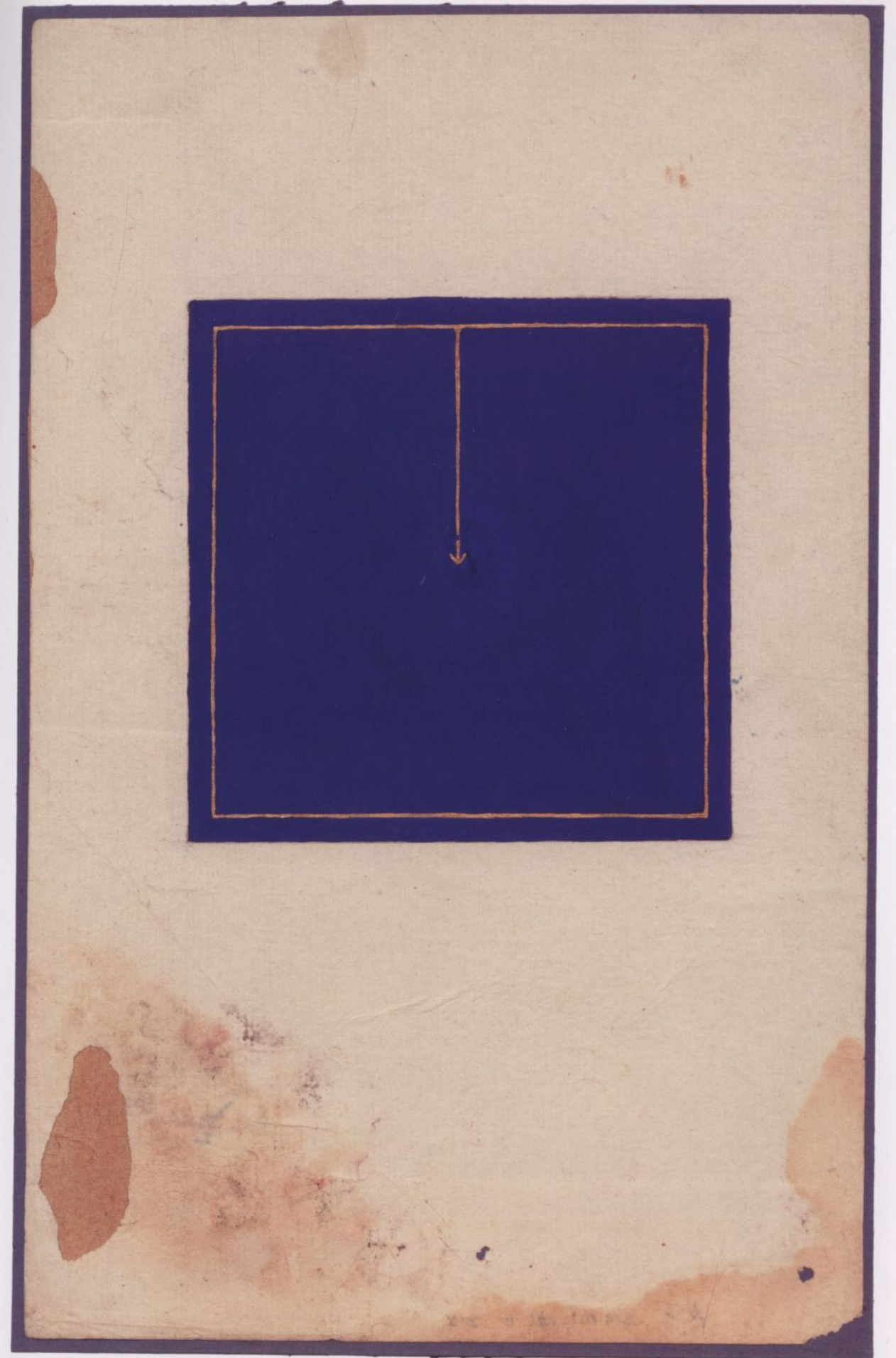








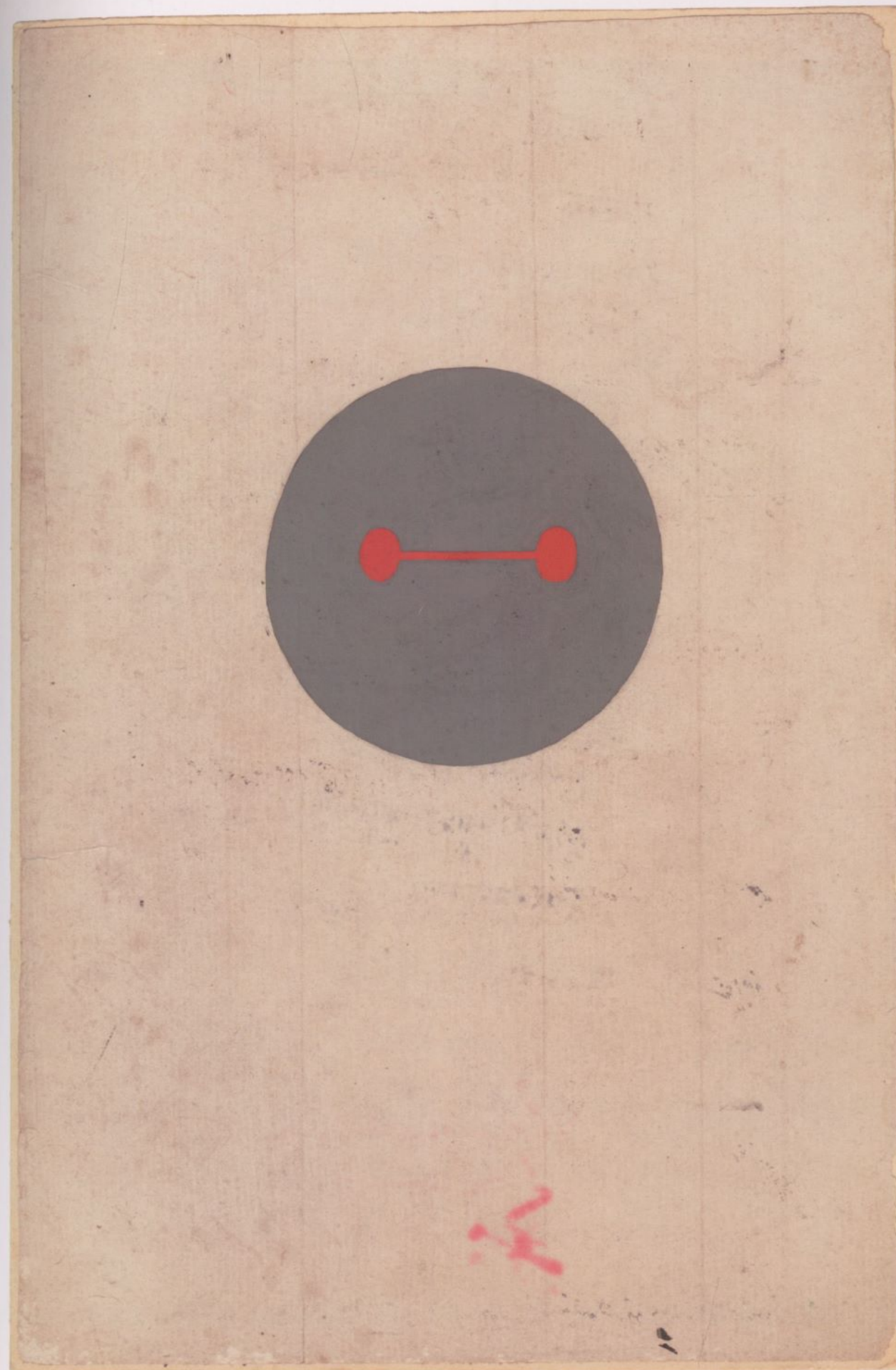








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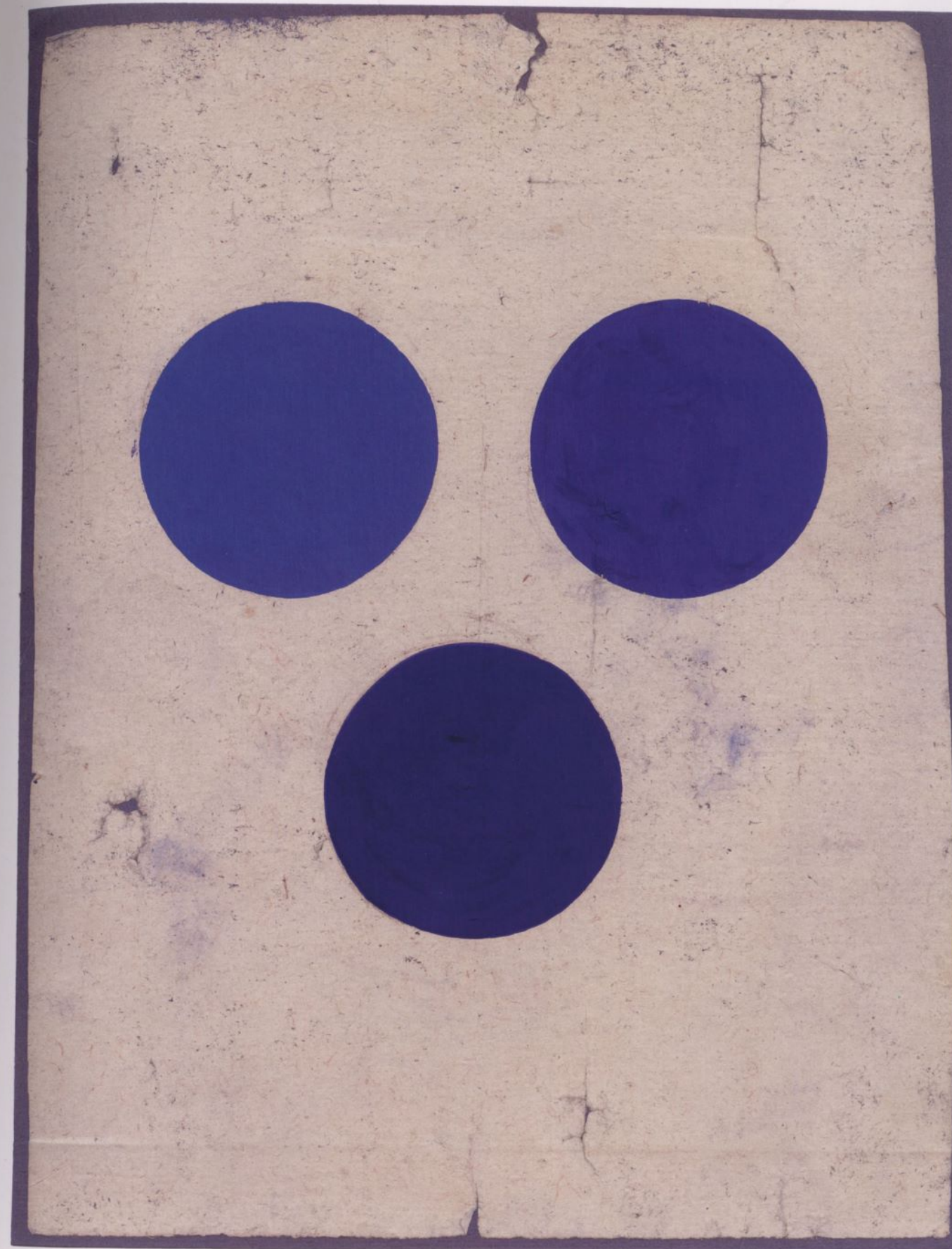
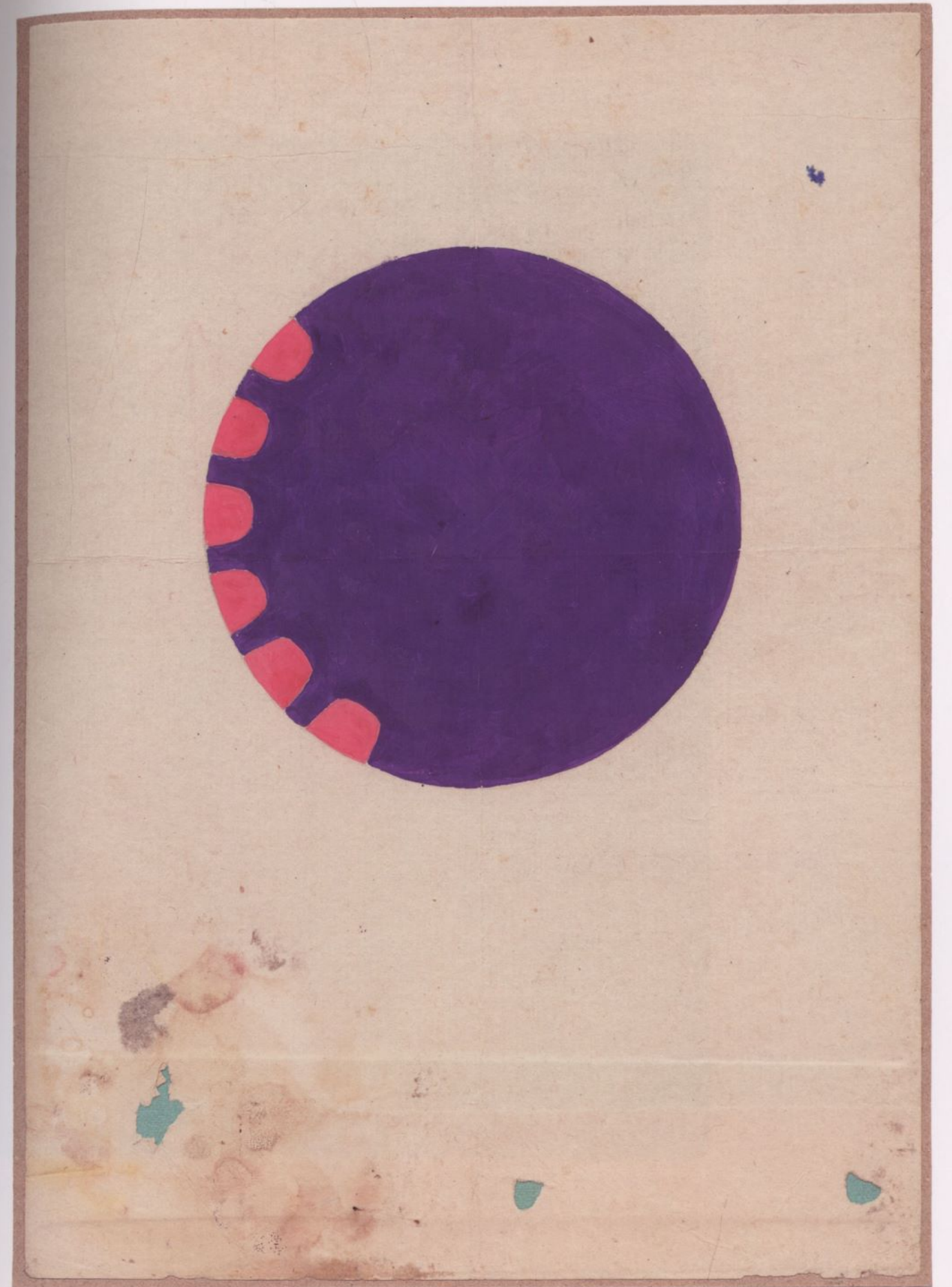




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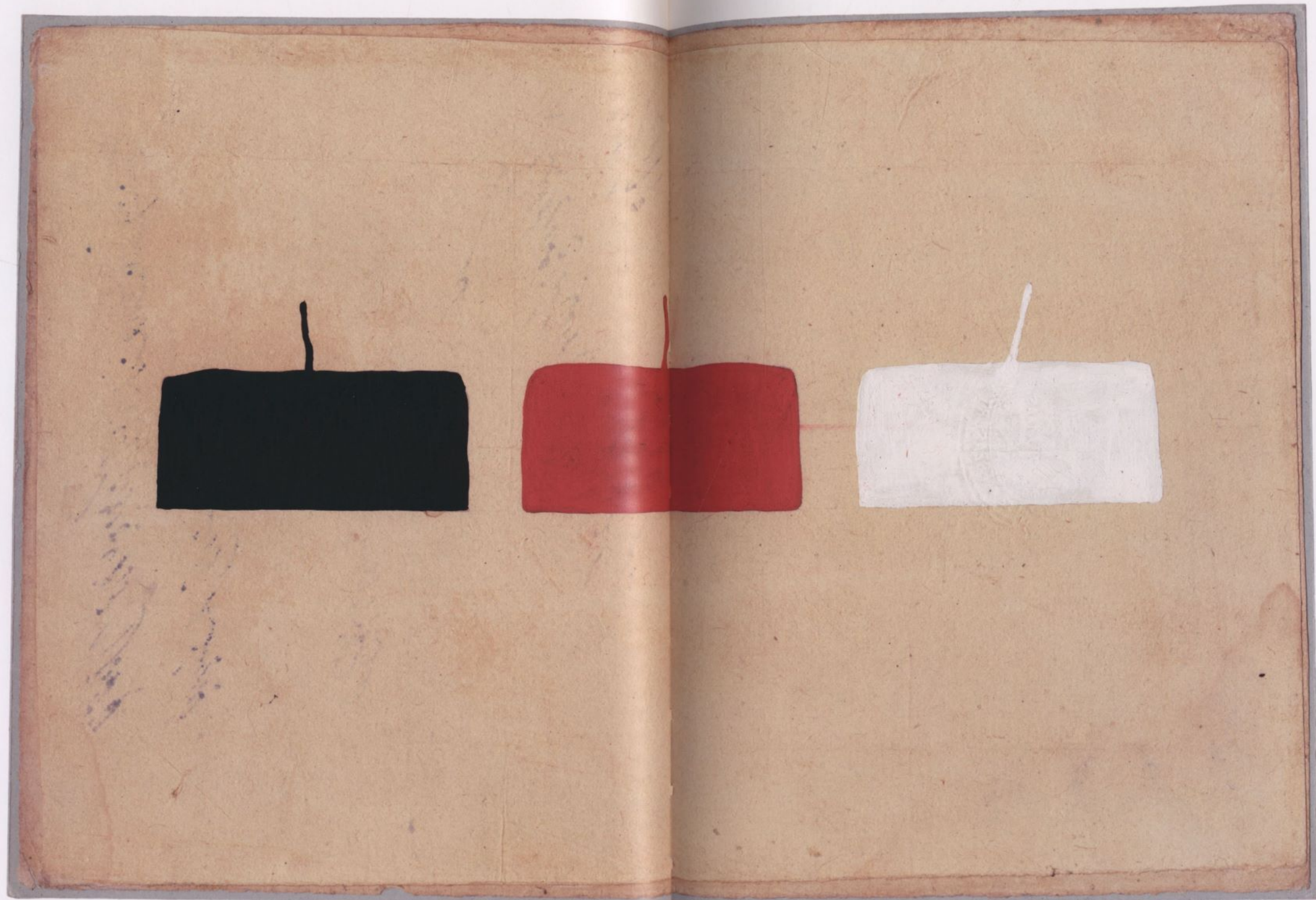
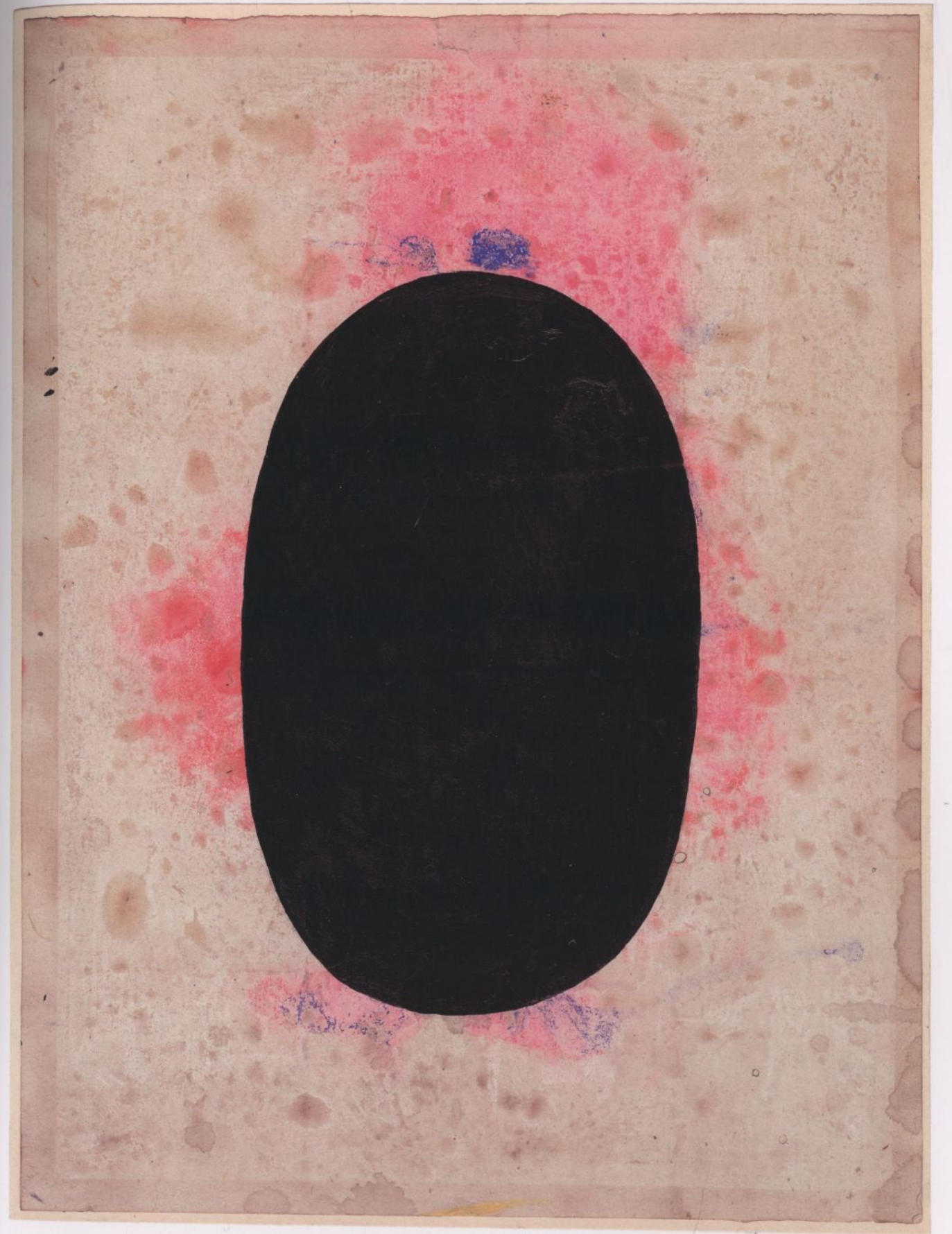




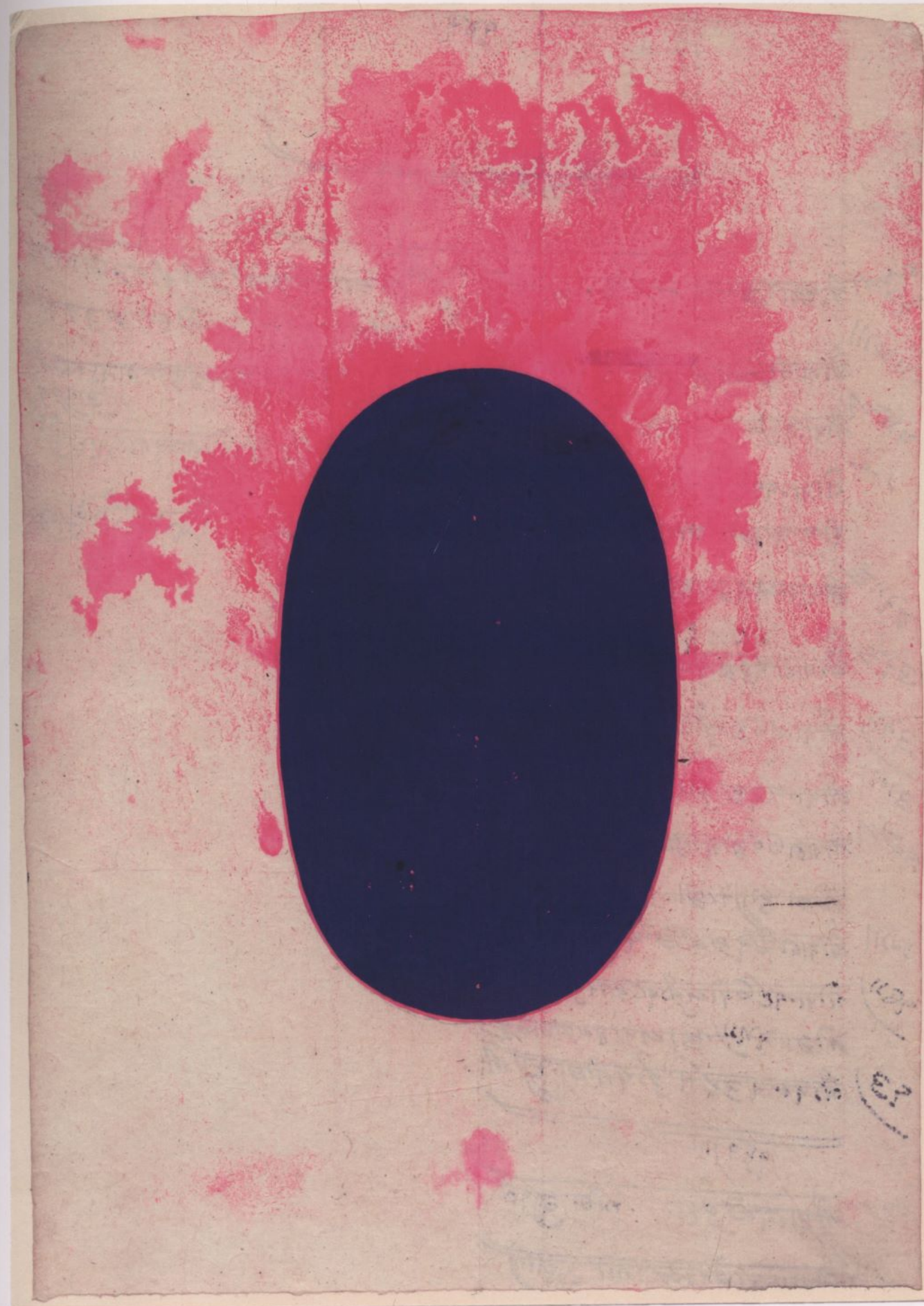
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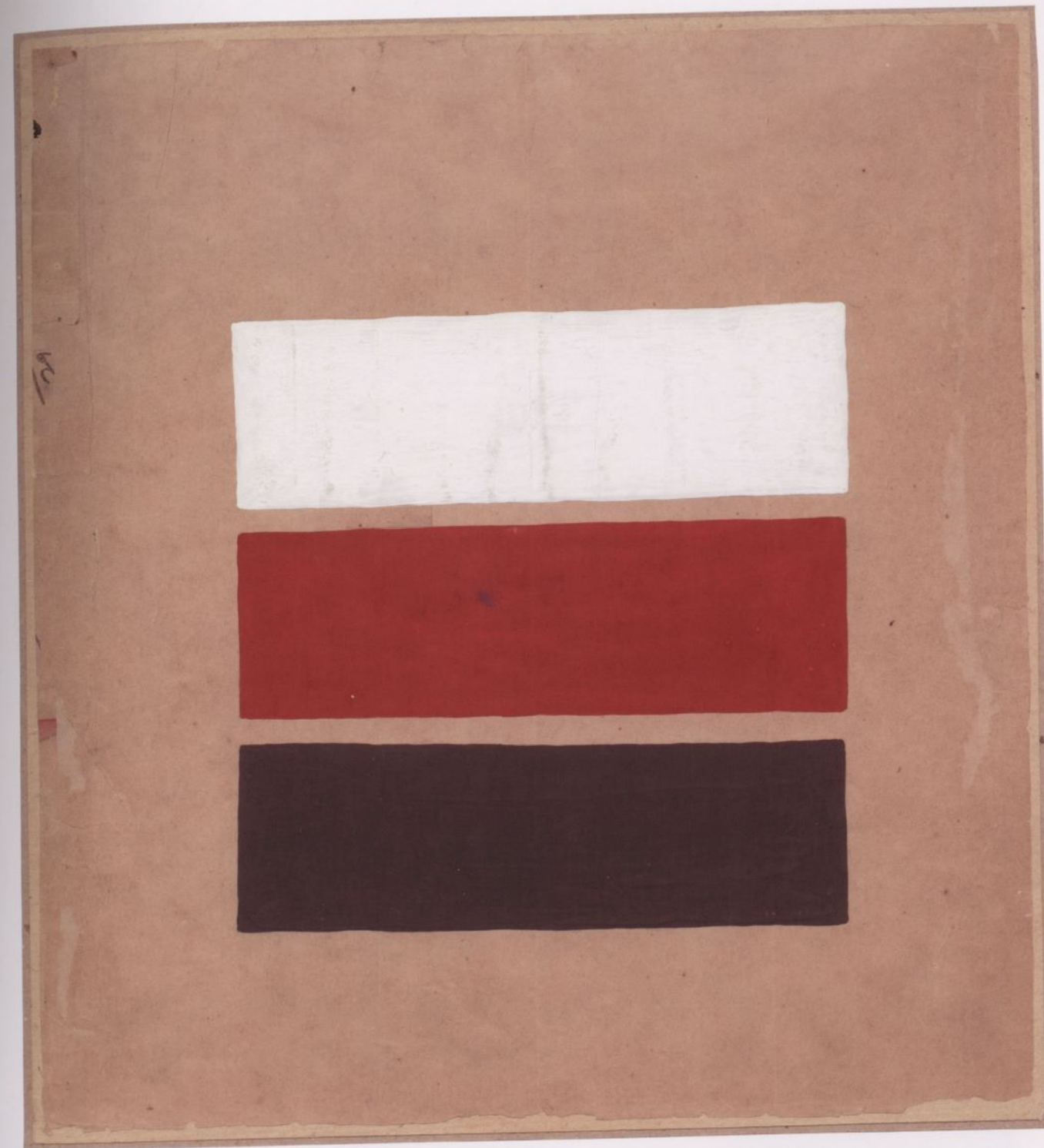
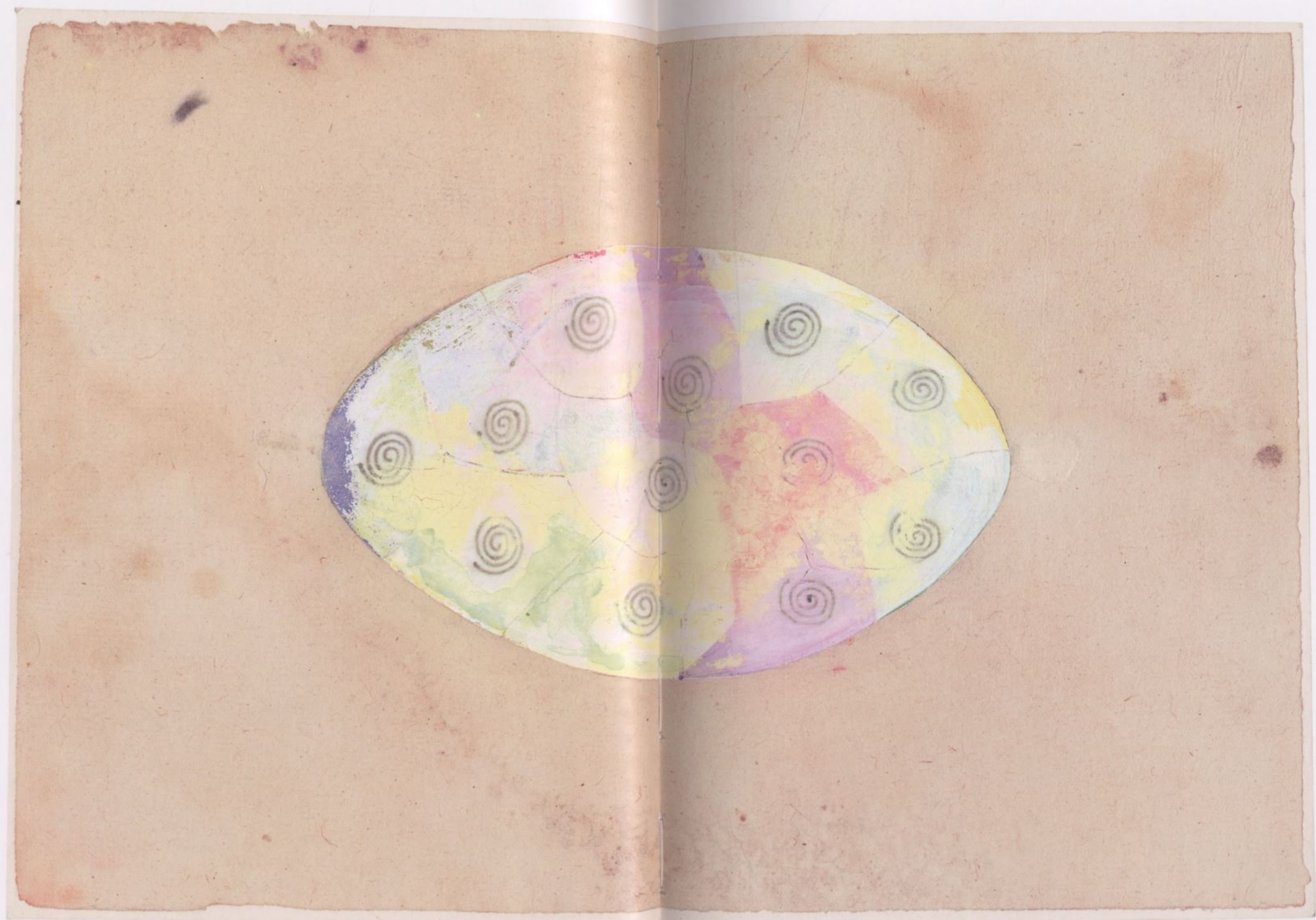




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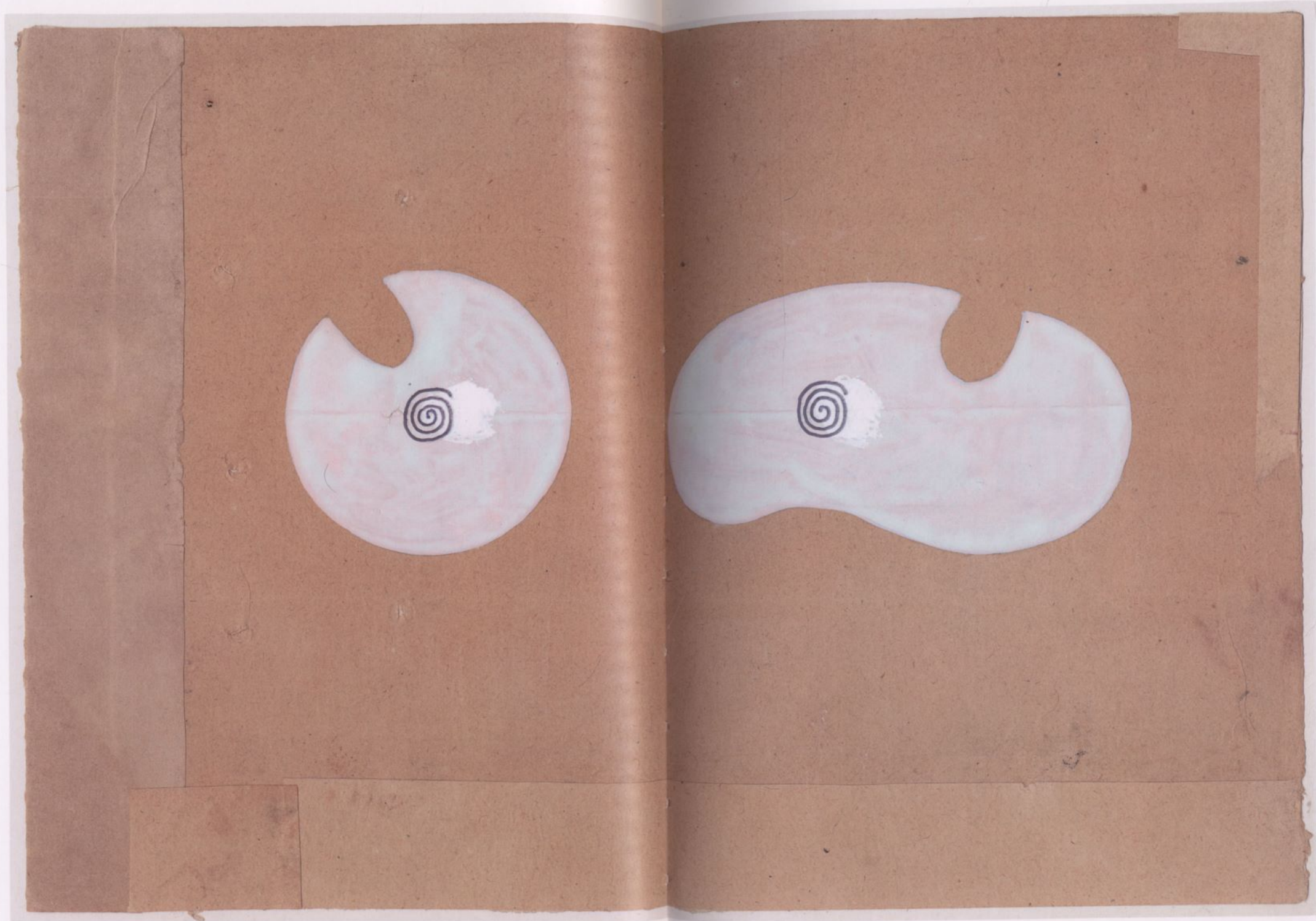
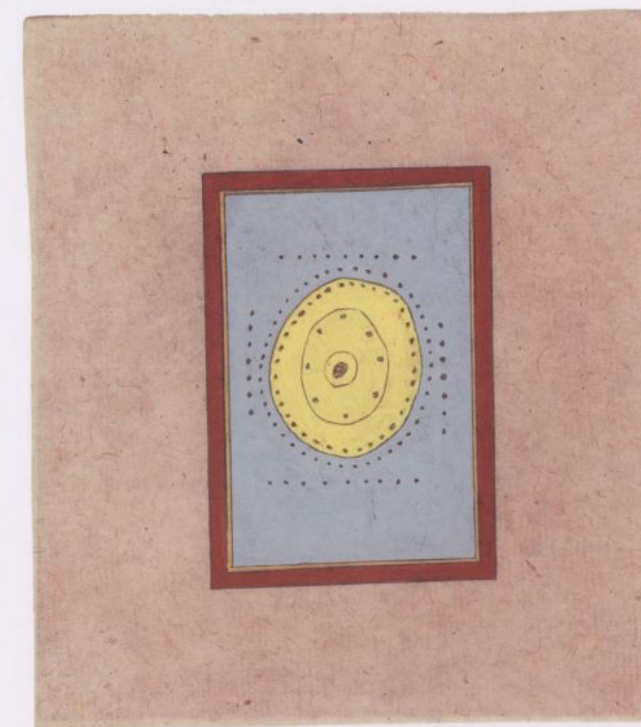
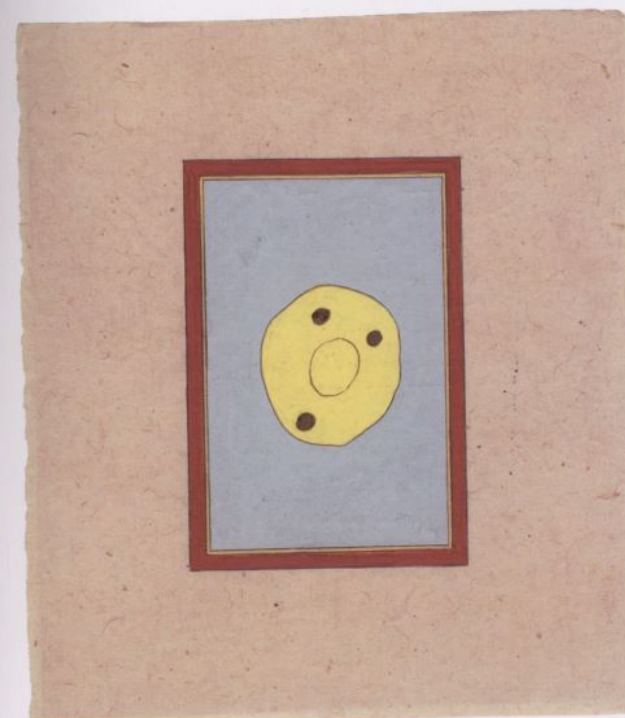
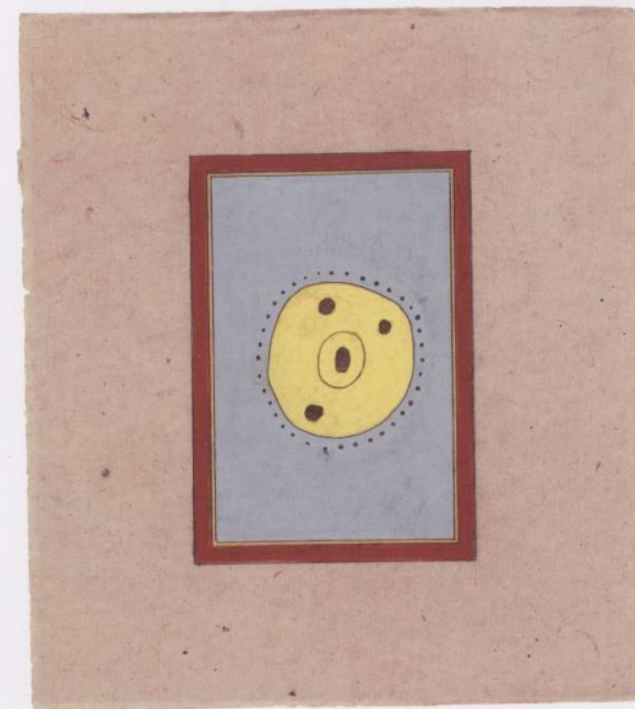
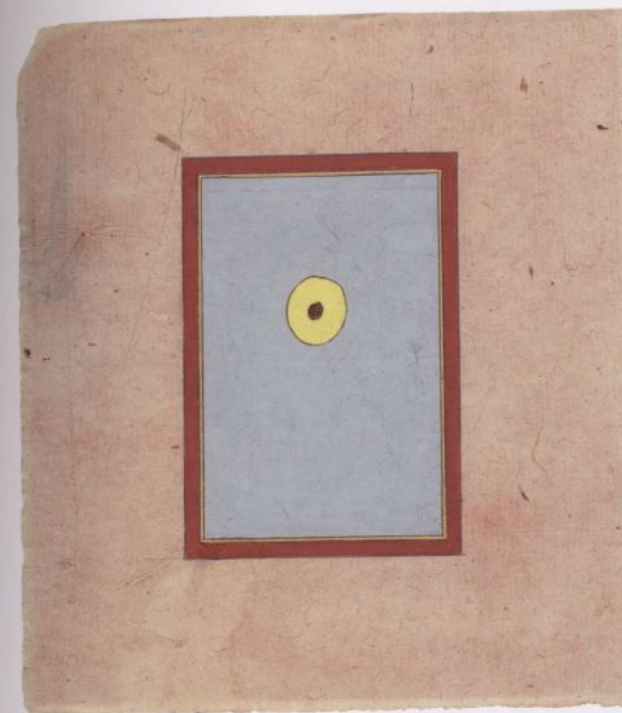
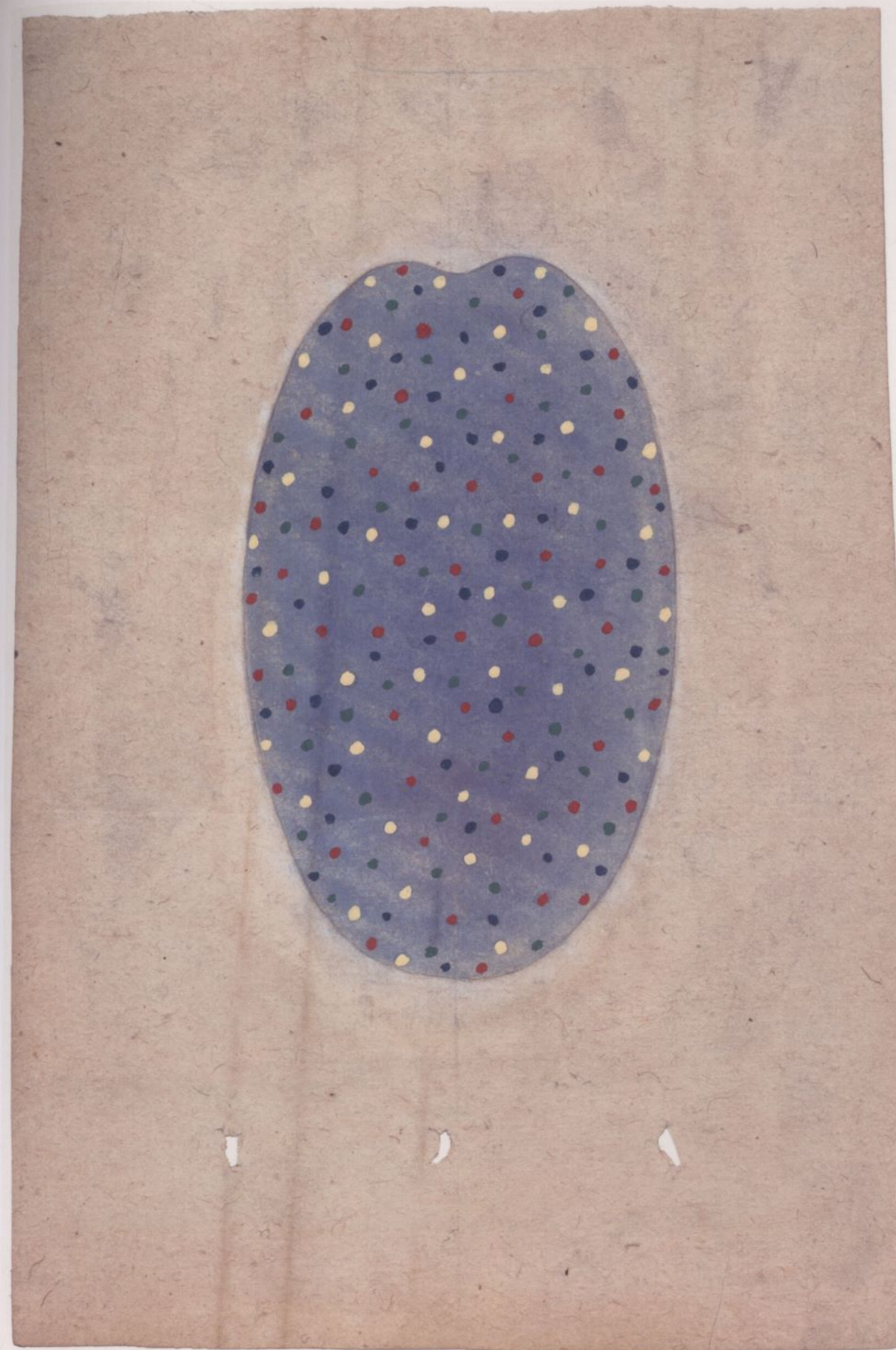




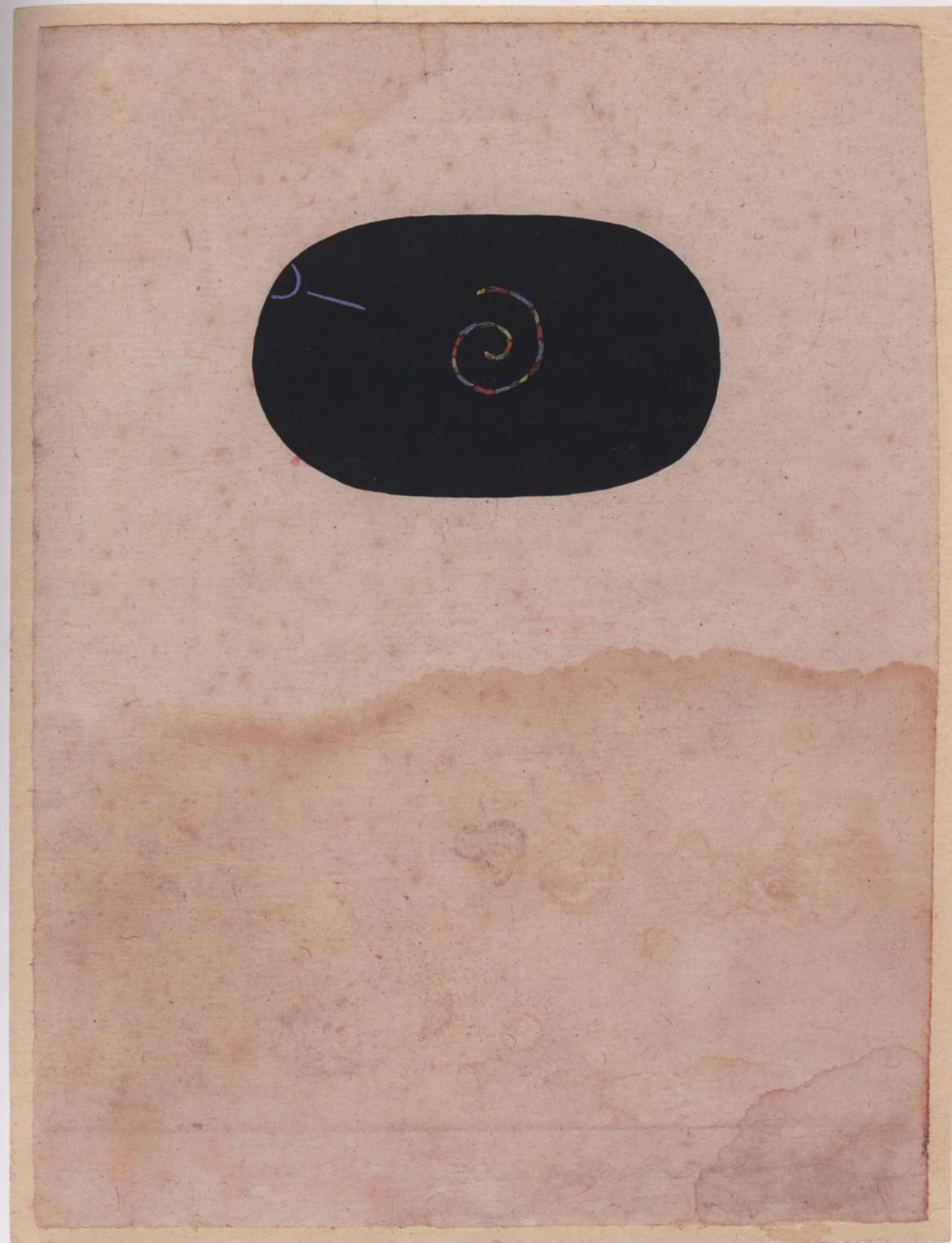
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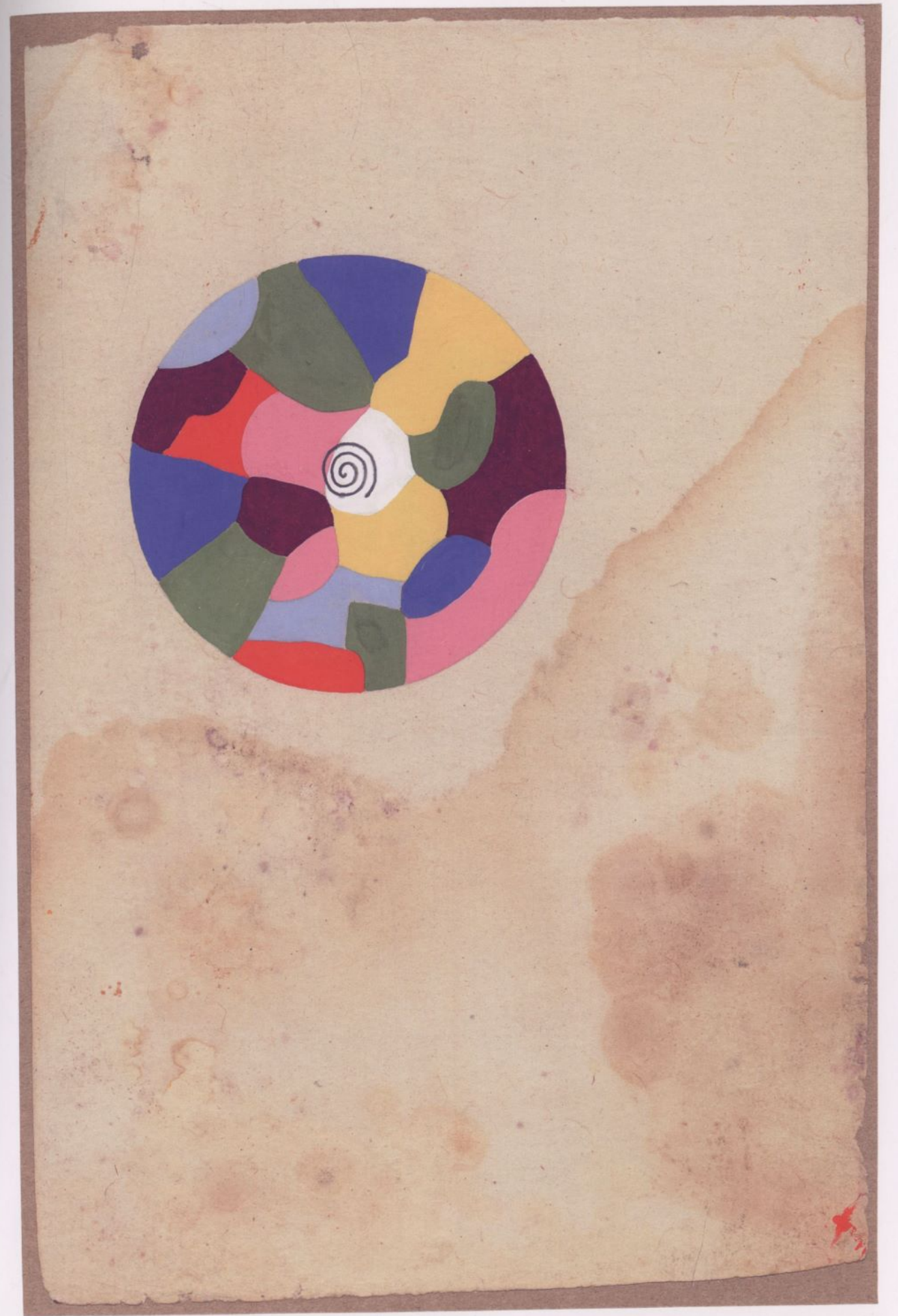




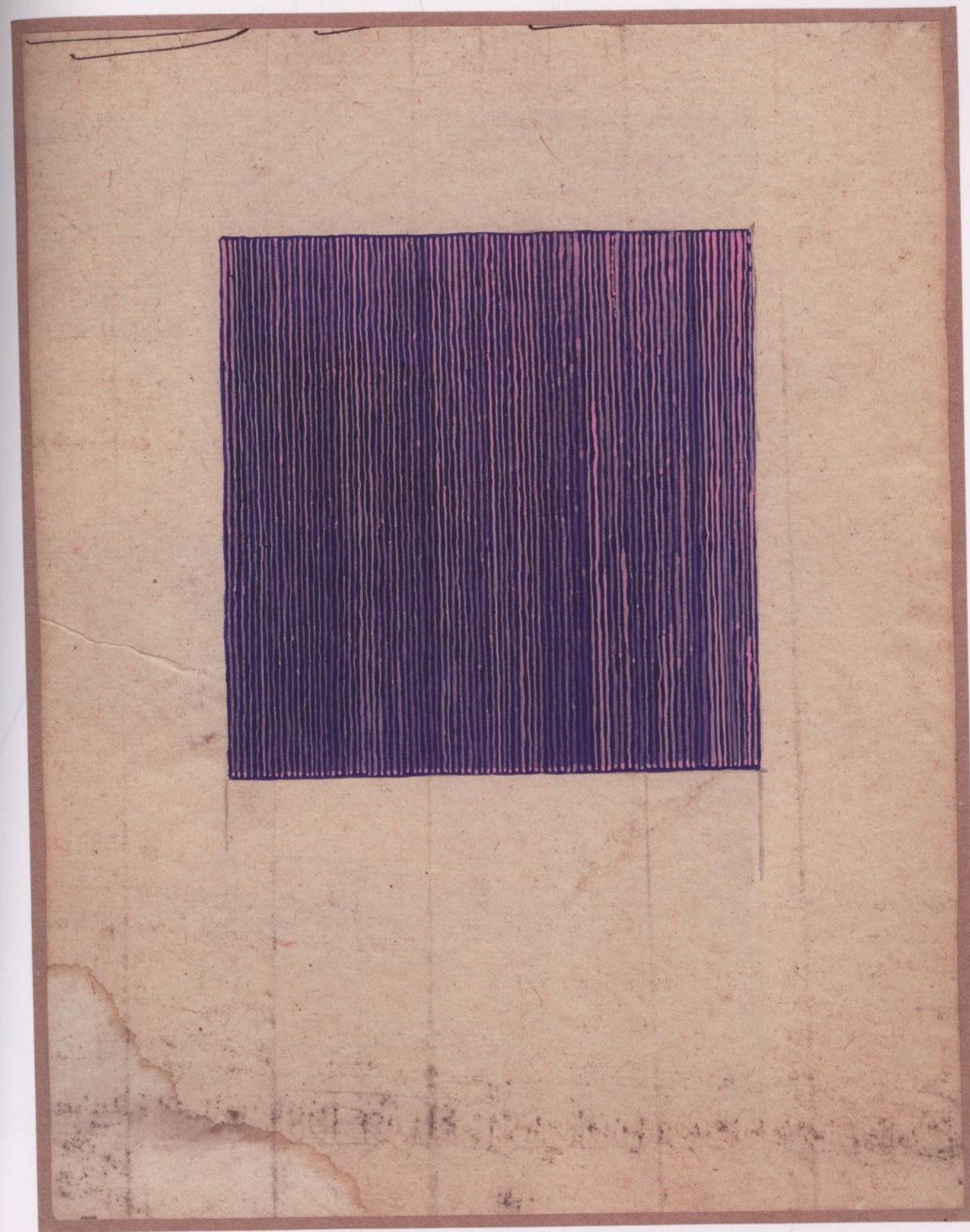
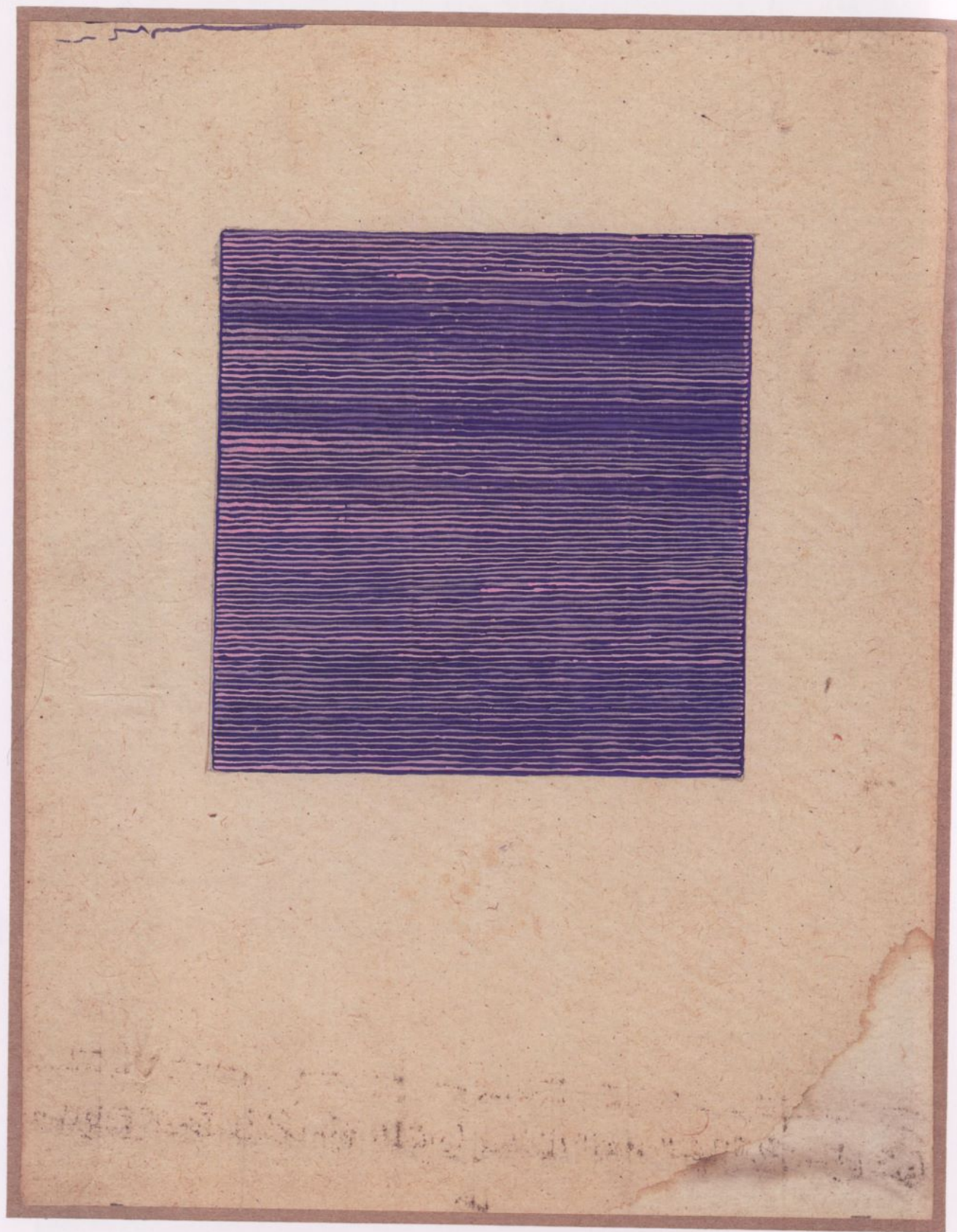




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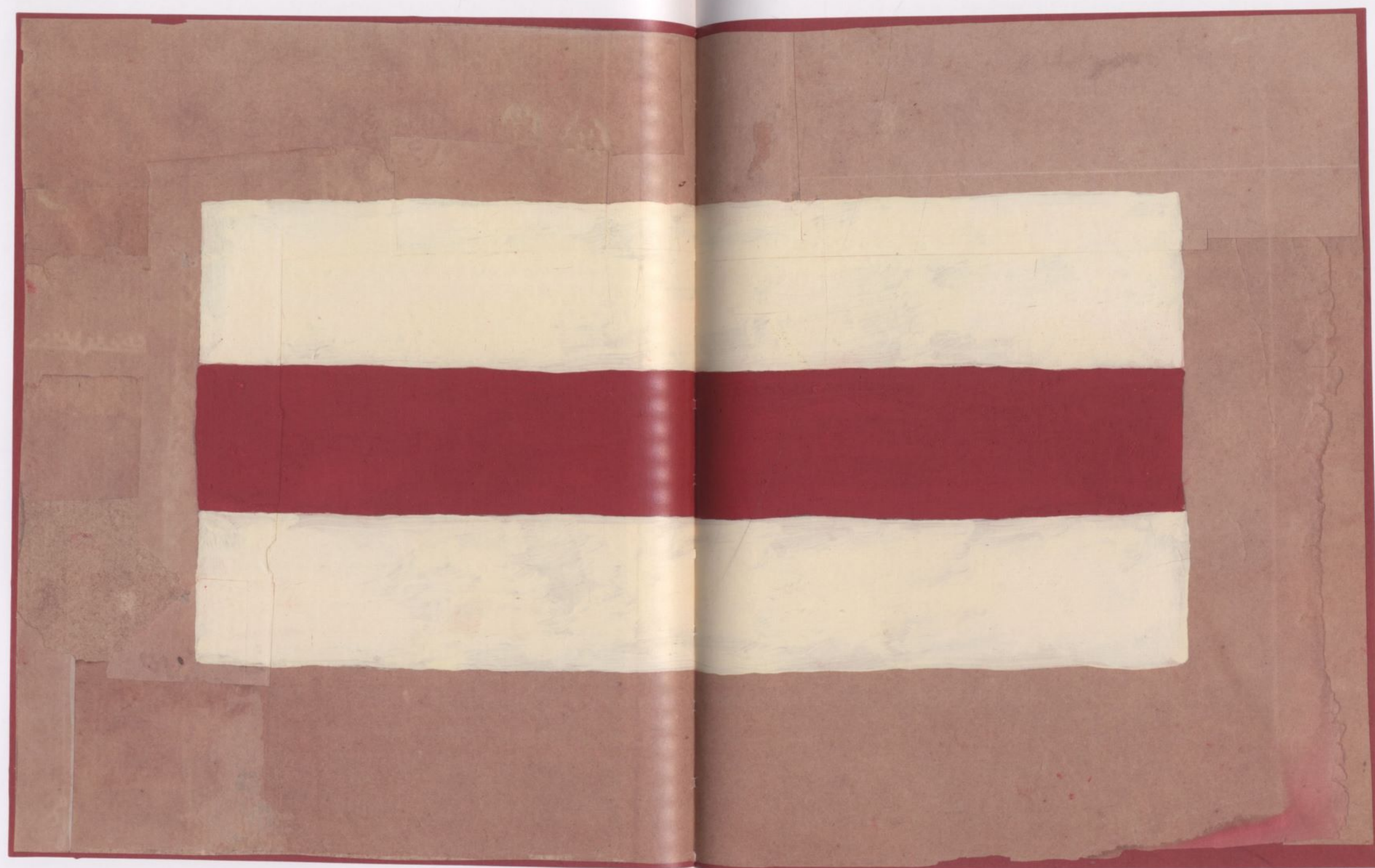




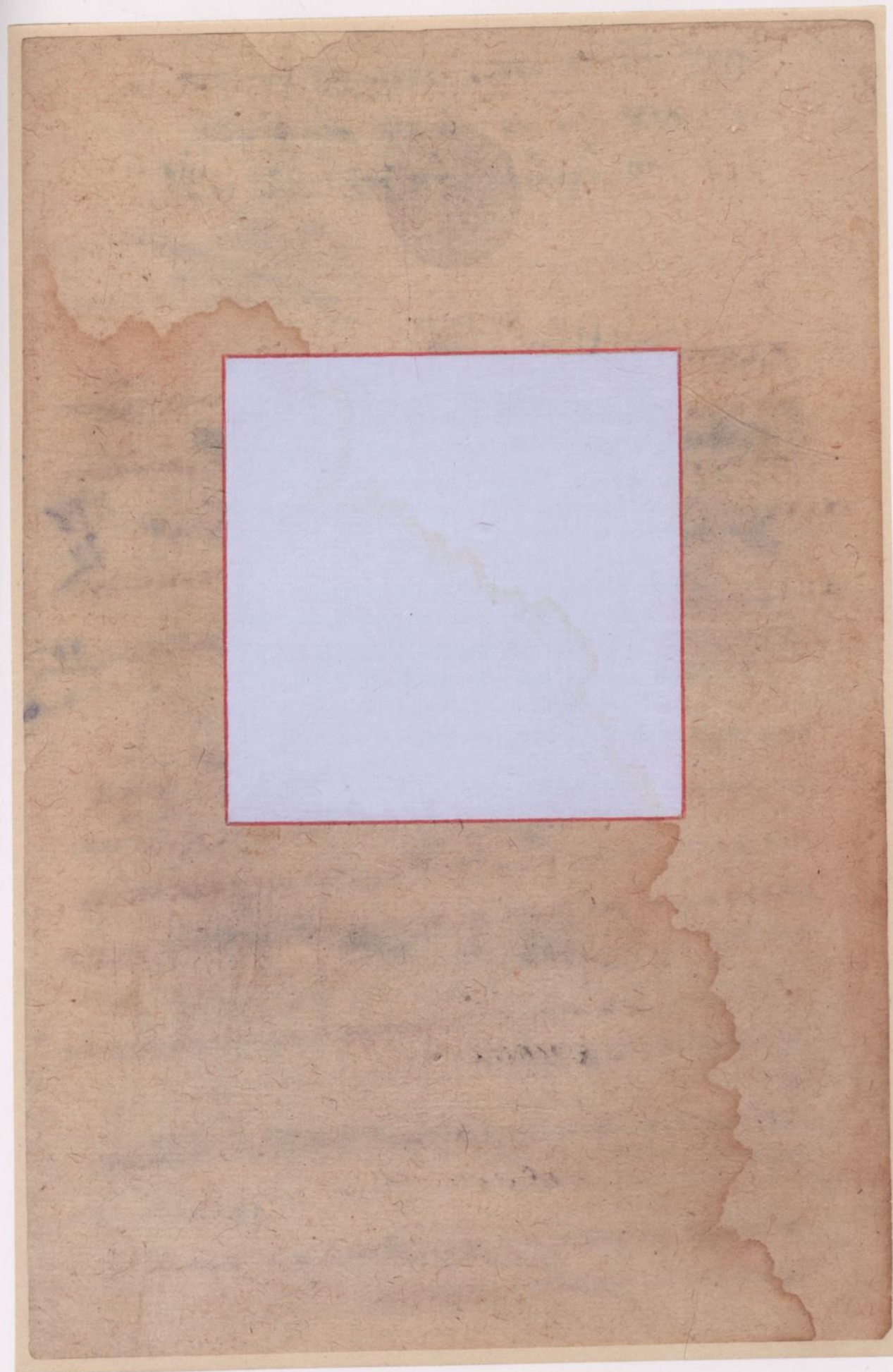
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## TANTRA SONG

### A Guidebook

Plate 1

Two *shaligrams*, the round forms. In praise of day and night. Revealing the gaze of all manifestation—the pupils, energy itself in spiral form. Until the adept plants his own gaze there. His eyes in these eyes.

2

The two eternal poles of the world meet, multiply and converse. Day and night. Light and shadow. Stillness and movement. Shiva and Shakti. Shakti, the feminine principle, energy, and in some way, mother of everything, including her “daughters” (her incarnations or images), goddesses such as Kali, Durga, Tara, Chandi, among others.

3

The eternal and frenetic race of the feminine principle towards its masculine counterpart. Shakti pursuing Shiva. Motion seeking stillness. The triangle of the Goddess is not presented with point downward, as tradition normally dictates, but in full agitation. In time, the triangle should come to actually tremble, vibrate, hover about its lover, its magnet.

4

Shakti in the manifestation of Kali, The Black One. According to an ancient treatise: “Just as all names and all forms disappear within Her, all colors disappear within black.” Night, once more, walks on night. (Kali, the goddess of time, hence of destruction and death. Obviously frightening, yet her black is shiny and luminous. She is loved because the terror that she emits also protects us, both inside and outside, from the demons who otherwise would constantly assail us.)

5

The twenty-eight dazzling tongues of Kali. (In the Vedas, Kali is also the seventh tongue of the god Agni, Fire). Kali extends her red tongue, its repetition inducing a true intoxication.

6

Indubitable scene of pure love. The Goddess, transfigured, has mounted Shiva. We might claim that the great Tantric mass is here intoned.

7

Tantra loves such reversals, such inversions. Shiva who had been dark as night has become as pink as a vulva, and she who was pink has reacquired her original color—Kali, The Black One.

8

Having circled the sky of consciousness, the Goddess suddenly arrives at her source, her center: her sex. The tip of energy's arrow, pointing toward the center. A variant, more explicit: the tip of the arrow is replaced by a tiny golden triangle. Or perhaps this too: the great mask of the divinity with hollow eyes.

9

The reign of energy, Shakti, in a linga sky. As if her lover Shiva's stillness could be suddenly endowed with speech. (After all, Kali with her garland of skulls, of letters,<sup>1</sup> is the goddess of language.) As if this spiral were the god's mouth uttering syllables of light. In her praise, the adept no doubt would be inclined to utter one of her mantras, giving voice to the ardent.

10

Somewhat of a mystery. A few clues: everything revolves around two axes—on one hand the birth of speech and on the other the granting of wishes. The two, perhaps, are to be mingled, or turned inside out, thus: birth of wishes and granting of speech.

11

Egg or almond or large eye. Or a mask with a roguish stare. Almost cheerful. As if the meditation suddenly assumed a certain insolence and looked energy straight in the eyes—just like a child.



12

Another from the shaligram family. A meditation on the possible and necessary balance of things, on temperance as well. Calm. Just. Here consciousness, sometimes too excited by its own lucidity, can finally relax.

13

A mnemonic painting for apprentices. The elder *tantrika*, day after day, hides two of the three circles with a cloth, so that the new disciple gradually learns to recognize, without error or hesitation, which of the three is revealed. Eventually, the apprentice achieves the goal "to know the colors," thus sharpening his vision so that he can imprint in his mind the specific and finest features (not only the colors and shapes, but even the accidents and flaws in the paper on which it is drawn) of whichever particular piece must be "practiced" or contemplated in order to visually recall it whenever desired, under any circumstance.

14

The notion of time or its tracks. Another interpretation: instantaneous emancipation and prosperity. For the *tantrika*, awareness of time's powerful stride can induce a sudden liberation, giving rise to a richness—especially within.

15

The three *gunas*, the "qualities" or conditions of existence, *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*: passivity of matter, active energy, and pure essence of things. (In Europe too, centuries ago, the black, red, and white were the three fundamental colors in alchemy.) Here, in the form of small candles, each has its own capacity to illuminate, even when one of these flames is black.

16 - 18

Simply the king. The Shiva linga, the original representation of the deity. Sign among signs (in Sanskrit *linga* means "sign"). In the form of a man's member joyful, erect, and sometimes so impassioned that, in the ritual, according to André Padoux, "it must be continually watered to cool it down." A sacred thing among things, and always present in the temple, as well as in those small sanctuaries located in family estates, and in the intimate secrets of peoples' homes. A body surrounded by vapors—another clear sign that a flame burns eternally within.

19

The three *gunas*, now in their natural ascension: from darkness to light passing through fire. A notion of passion sleeps (or dreams) in *rajas*, the central step; while in *sattva*, the final stage, it's a taste of kindness.

20

Amidst the most perfect silence and calm—in a kind of milky dream—the discrete presence of an equally perfect inversion, so dear to Tantrism: here the spiral turns the "wrong" way. A quiet struggle against a crazed energy? Some obstinately speak only of calm or peace, but could the *tantrika* perhaps simply have been left-handed?

21

Ovoid, but a shaligram still. Each tender region bearing its own spiral, in an even stronger dispersal of the world's energy, its Shakti.

22

The universal manifestation constantly evolving, growing, changing form. Modern physics does not contradict: energy is at the origin of this continuous swell.

23 - 26

A quartet: the expansion and evolution of the *bindu*, the point, the first drop that contains, in repose, all manifestation. After slowly expanding, all will eventually end by contracting back into this very drop. This cycle forever repeating. The second shows the three *gunas*. The third is the marriage of the first two. The fourth, dissemination: general pollination.

27

A strange linga with a cordiform prow, or brow. One phase in the movement of the world: that of "the dance." In light of the ancient tantras, an alliance too, if not connivance, of Shiva and Vishnu.

28

The "illustrious fish," the little blue fork that some eccentrics call "the little blue tongue." One of Vishnu's ten incarnations descending into the night of our dark world, yet under the seal of energy (the multicolored spiral, thus having the power to sport all aspects of manifestation, all taste, all color). As if this energy, slightly drunk on its own richness, and turning in reverse, agreed to be guided—in the time without time of a painting, by a god become fish.



Two somewhat eccentric *shivlings* (Indians sometimes abbreviate Shiva linga in this way). Here the god of awareness displays a face unlike any other, with eyes that could also be tiny wings. Or with a mouth, by which to praise our beloved Kali (the goddess, remember, not only of time but of language).

Pure energy, reigning over all the colors of the world. Perhaps a snapshot of the unceasing development of all colors, all shades, all grains. Here too the cosmic form of Vishnu.

Fundamentally, a dialogue: a ray of light stretching between our gloomy world and the spiral of energy. By guiding this energy, the adept is able to "ride" the world, tame it and thus not suffer the world, but escape its clutches. The shade of blue reflects the degree of illumination experienced or desired by the one holding the brush. Another, more humble reading: in the sky of consciousness, a state of controlled equilibrium (the clear red line) between the two forces that rule the world, one active (the spiral), the other static (the dark dot).

A warlike shaligram. The spiral has seized control of a terribly dark, but still blue sky of consciousness—or it has taken possession of our own almost black world. The attack bears fruit, and energy now reigns, illuminating the darkness which slowly begins to revolve. The adept will eventually inhabit the image until it too revolves in his own eyes.

East to West and South to North, a contemplation on the four directions, all that is visible in this world summarized in infinite lines, albeit trembling slightly. (These images derive from the simple metal stamps that were once used in India to print lines for writing on manuscript pages and unlined notebooks.) The truest, most complete world is there, in a sort of cross. Yet to create it, or work on it, definitely requires a profound degree of mastery.

Power and vastness. The blood of energy flowing in the world and of course within us. As Tantra has nothing against inversion, the colors of the river and the land can also be reversed, in which case the liquid fire (or burning water) of energy appears more sand of light than flow of blood. Should it have a name, maybe then "The Traversed."

The endless dance of energy. Time and space. A meditation on the active principle of all manifestation, of movement, of life.

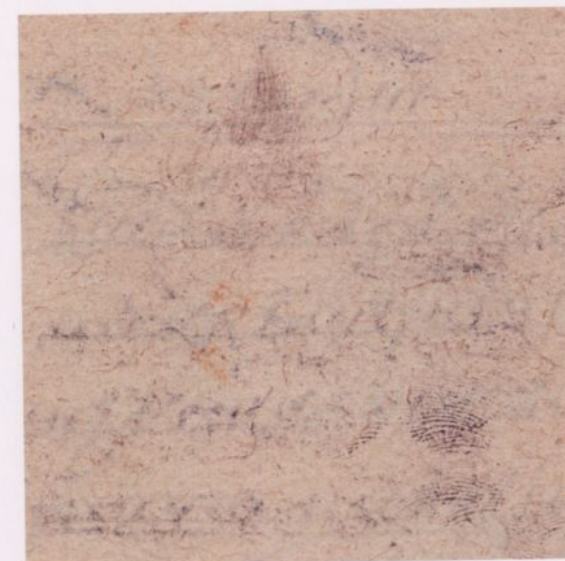
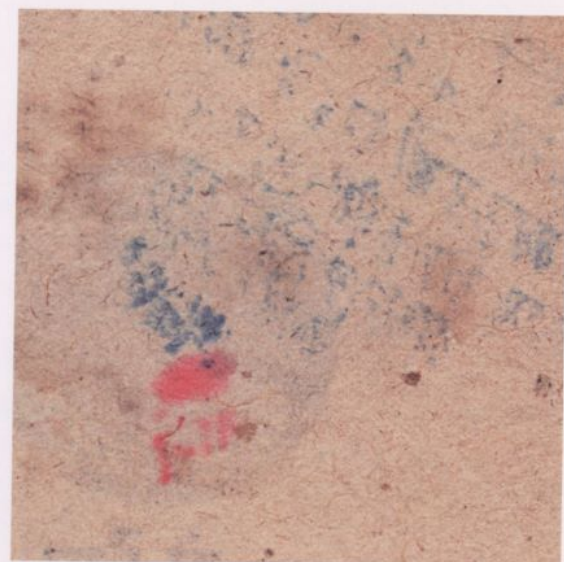
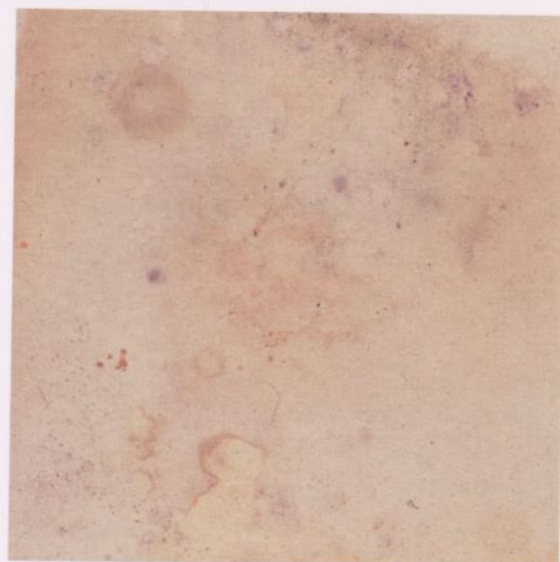
A golden bronze bindu, a point or drop of extraordinarily concentrated energy, containing, in the words of André Padoux, "the undifferentiated absolute." In working with this image, the adept will come to "see" the world—as it is and in its entirety.

The purer the consciousness, the bluer and clearer the sky.

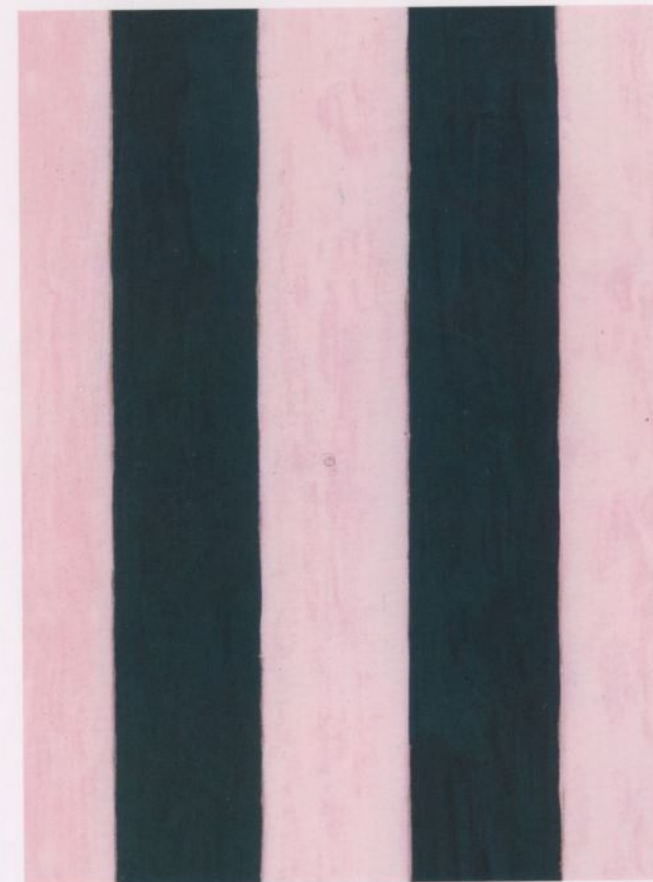
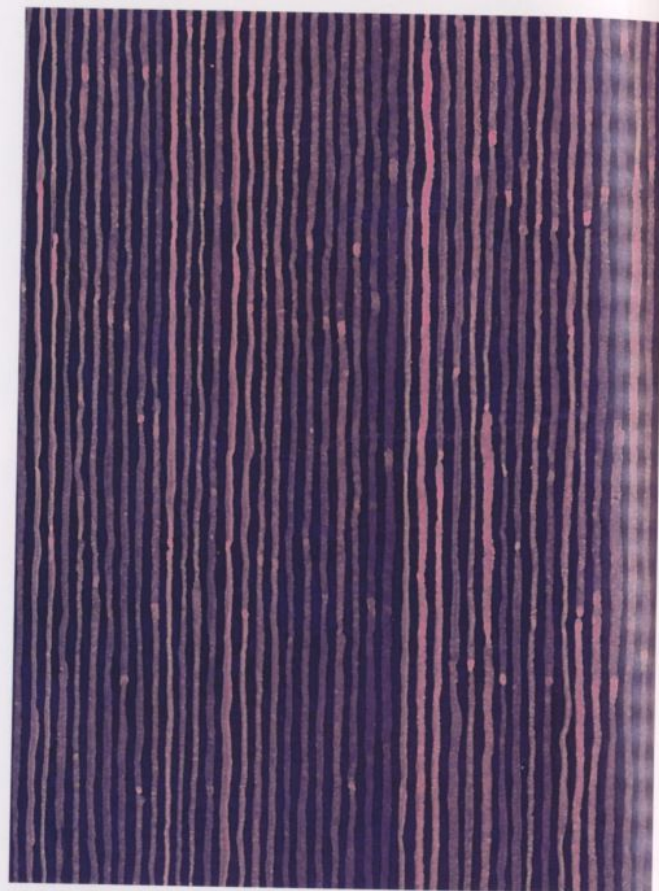
## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Each of these skulls corresponds to a letter in the Sanskrit alphabet. Although in the paintings it is only possible to count those on the front, there are typically fifty-one, which is a result of adding the phoneme "KSHA" and the Vedic "L" to the forty-nine "classical" letters.

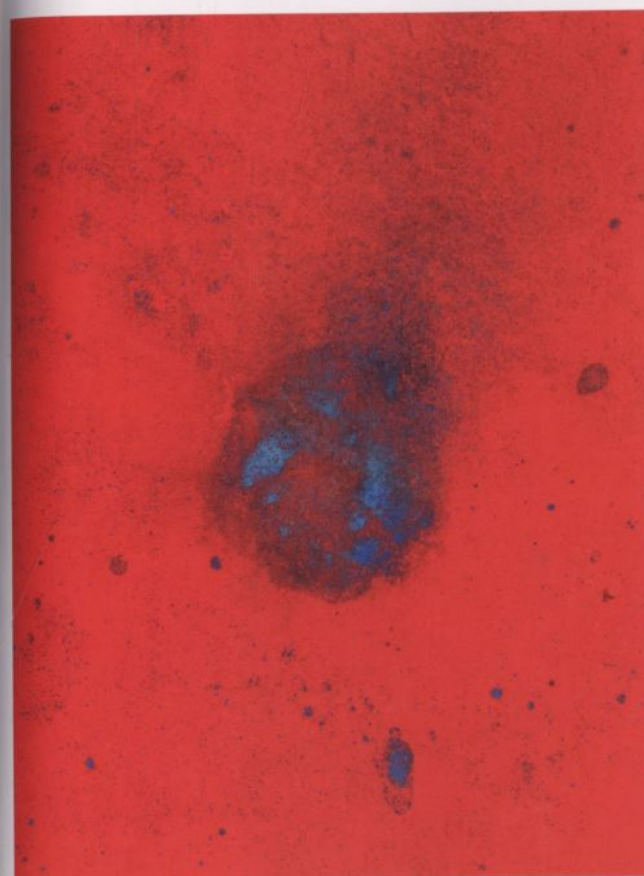
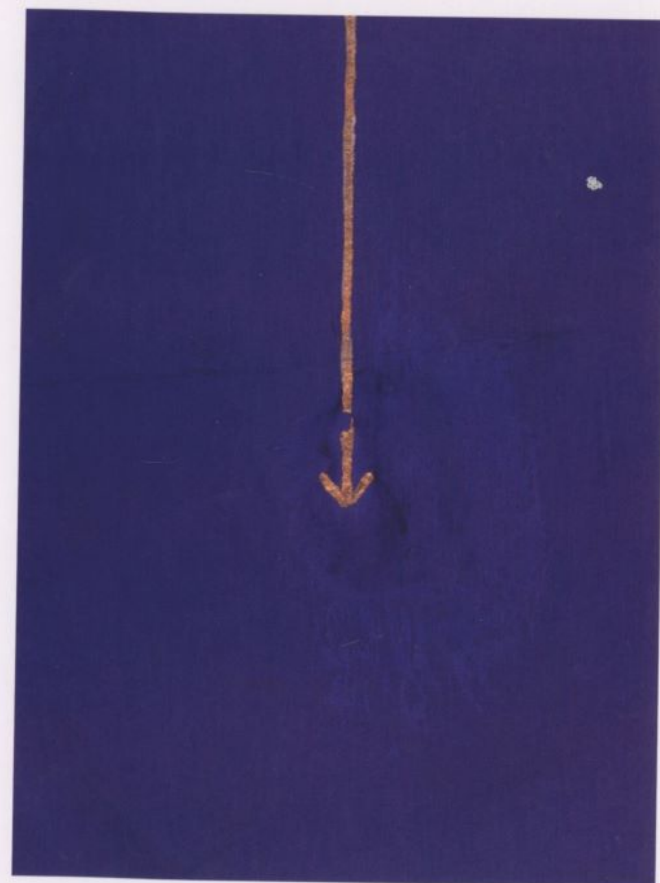




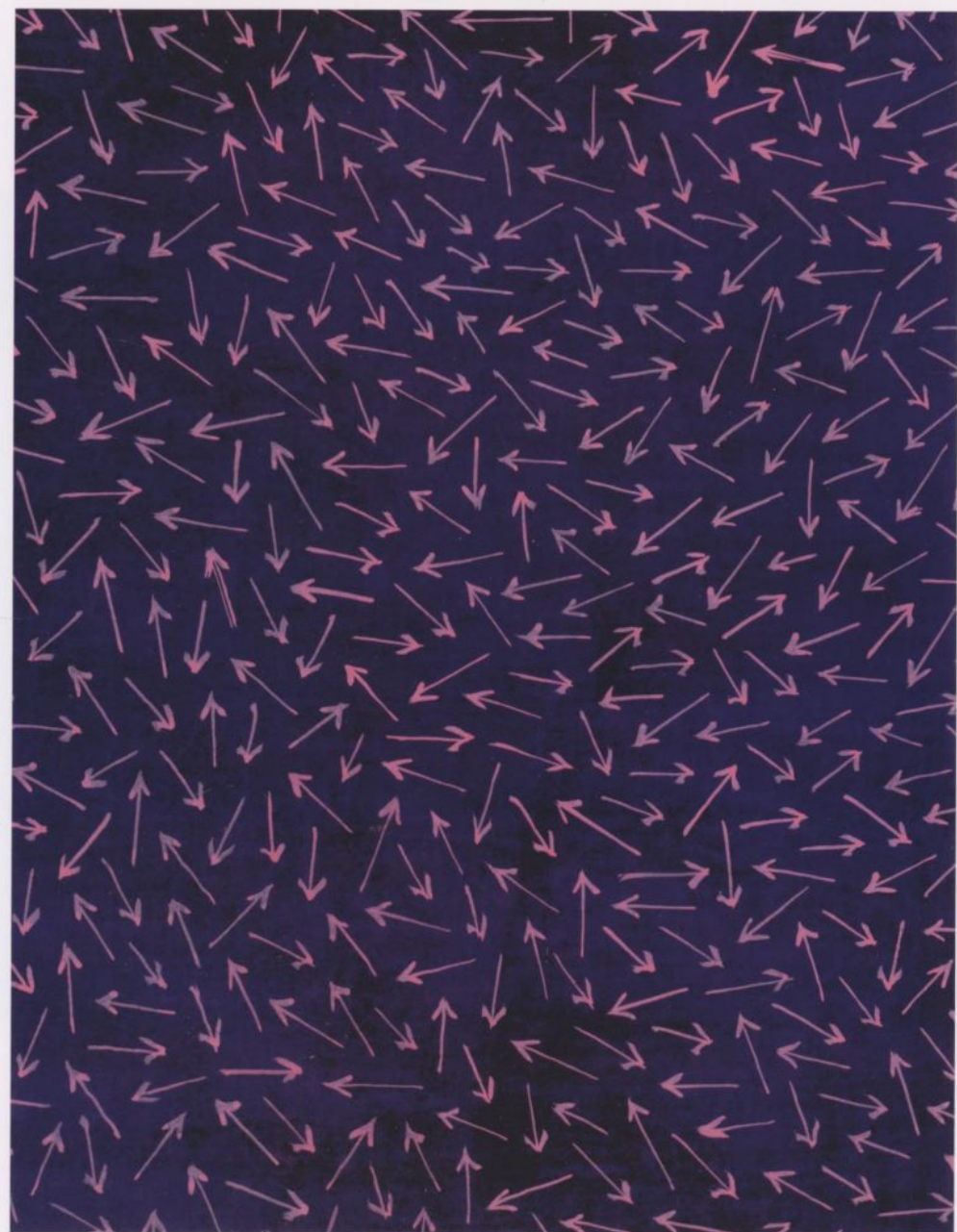














## FUMBLING FOR THE KEYS

### Notes on Tantric Painting

In India there are three styles of Tantric paintings.<sup>1</sup> First, those that have come under the influence of Jainism:<sup>2</sup> these can be recognized straightaway, generally executed on silk or fine canvas and sometimes quite large. Representing various aspects of Jain cosmology, they are sumptuous and garish, covered with geometric forms, stylized figures, and writing. Found in southern Rajasthan and Gujarat and, along with some erotic paintings, throughout the country in the "Tantric" section of art shops (when these boutiques have such a section). Next come popular Hindu paintings, rawer, wilder, and for which a label has even been invented—"tantra-folk art." Typically on paper, but really any surface that allows one to draw or paint on it will do: boards, floors, walls, etc. Quite rare, they can be found, with some difficulty, throughout northern India, and in some regions of Kerala, in the south. Lastly, those Hindu paintings that could be described as "scholarly." Originally part of illuminated manuscripts, they have retained the reasonable size and paper support of their forebears. Even more rare than the others; more sought after too.

Tradition further distinguishes between geometric and abstract pieces and those which are, more or less, representational. According to the flavors that they evoke and induce in the mind of the one meditating, they are divided into three types: "serene and sublime," "dynamic" or "active," and "terrifying."

As far as climate conditions and poor conservation allow us to surmise, these representations first appeared during the 17<sup>th</sup> century within the handwritten treatises known as tantras. More accurately, the oldest that we are aware of date from this period. It is not at all impossible that earlier examples disappeared, slowly succumbing to the relentless wear caused by worms, rats, monsoons, and carelessness.

It is strange, in such a baroque country, to find images so concise, almost dry; yet these images, together with their treatises, were copied over and over throughout the ages. But they were also copied independently of the texts, on separate sheets—becoming, in the homes

of families and groups practicing Tantric ritual or in the little sacks carried by wandering ascetics (*sadhus*) of the same school, purely autonomous supports for meditation. These are the ones reproduced here.

It is almost impossible to find any of these marvels in southern India. Everything really happens in the North—in Kashmir, Bengal and Rajasthan, but primarily, in Rajasthan. Perhaps simply because that state remains the heart of painting for the entire subcontinent (this might be due to the fact that Rajasthan has more squirrels—those little devils whose hairs are used to make brushes—than anywhere else in India).

\*

Tantrism rejects speculation. What it does recommend, absolutely, is practice, or rather practices: recitation of mantras,<sup>3</sup> breath control, work with the *kundalini*,<sup>4</sup> sexual union . . . and visualization (of these paintings, among other things), in an active meditation by which the adept actually attempts to identify with the image before them and, through it, with the specific deity that it evokes.

Extreme, this ancient, great spiritual (and initiatory) current. According to it, we are in the "Dark Age" and liberating ourselves in this very lifetime—freeing ourselves from the world by dominating it—can only be achieved by attempting to become aware of, to arouse and to direct the energy lying dormant within us, as this force is none other than the one that animates the world, namely Shakti, the principle of energy.

Action, direct experience in and through the world (the reality of which is thus total), these shall henceforth be the bywords.<sup>5</sup> Even if this means occasionally employing magic. And asceticism must be banished for good.<sup>6</sup>

Embracing even an undeniable odor of sulphur: when, in certain groups of *tantrikas*, it is, for example, strongly recommended for the initiate, whether man or woman, to immerse themselves in impurity and social transgression in order to liberate the dark forces, forbidden and dangerous, but terribly effective powers that might, in turn, free the adept.

Embracing even the culture of the secret, inherent in all initiate societies: where the language used in certain treatises is mainly coded, intentional, as the texts themselves describe it—brother of our "Cabala," the ancient "language of birds" employed by European alchemists during the great epoch of their own quest.

Embracing even the acquisition of strange powers. To hear one's hair growing, or one's fingernails. To control one's dreams and to move at will within them.



\*

Let's return to our images. Their creators have always been anonymous, in that these designs are not really pure creations, but rather passed on from generation to generation, a series of revisitations of old schemas. They are produced (in rather small numbers) by tantrika families, in which some—we are, don't forget, in Rajasthan, the Indian state bursting with traditional painting studios, in particular miniaturists—are professional painters.<sup>7</sup> Bizarrely it would take a large group exhibition in Europe back in the late eighties for the name of one of these faceless painters, at the strange request of the organizers of that unforgettable event<sup>8</sup> to appear publicly for the first time. The artist in question has since returned to his anonymity, to his customs, to his nameless labour. Marvelous anonymity. Like an antidote. Or a balm.

Over there, in India, those who still practice the ritual acquire, or make, a copy of the image specified for their meditation. They then paste or pin it up at home above their altar. It fades, wrinkles, ages . . . until replaced by another, fresher, one.

Still, there are collectors of these pieces, even in India. Almost all that we know about Tantric art comes to us from one of them, Ajit Mookerjee—who, it should be noted, was also an adept. One could almost say that this man's passion essentially "invented" this art. Just to be clear, the paintings obviously existed before him, but he was the one who gathered and founded the collection: from sparse members, from solitary bits scattered here and there, he was able to assemble a veritable body of work. Sometimes he even went too far, for example wrongly dating some pieces or mistaking their place of origin, and even today one can't understand why. Evidently, a unique and complex man.

And then there are the "foreigners," us, steeped from an early age in the river of 20<sup>th</sup> century art and to whom these pieces, upon being discovered for the first time, without knowing anything about them, often seem immediately familiar. Like mother's milk.

These images are ageless, or perhaps the human spirit is always the same regardless of place or time, or even that, at the time of their birth, their style heralded an art yet to come—hence everything was already present within them.

Some people, who speak somewhat hastily, call them "copies." I however prefer "interpretations"—or better yet, since after all we are in India, *ragas*. For if the structure, the register of these images is always the same, from one sister-piece to another, their lines, shades and dimensions vary only slightly each time, according to the hand holding the brush, its talent and know-how. And, above all, according to the state of calm, of concentration, of mental rapture that was guiding that particular hand on that particular day.

\*

Though the gestures, postures, mantras, and repetition of Tantric rituals have been long codified, with the extreme precision that India is capable of—this country which seems to have always had an unparalleled passion for detail and classification—these images however suffered another fate. To the best of our knowledge, their meaning is not strictly fixed. Most likely because the painters have always had a consummate ability to take liberties with what, at one time, was the canon. And also because we have no systematic translation of the treatises that contain them (in particular it would be necessary to know for sure whether the texts comment on the paintings or if the images illustrate what is written). Quite astonishing really. Not a single researcher in the world appears to have been inclined to clarify the precise symbolism of these pieces. Generally the books on Tantric art that we have at our disposal (I am thinking first and foremost of those of Mookerjee and his students) lack a thorough analysis of this particular lineage of painting. We would like to know more. It was necessary to meet, in India, quite a few painters, amateurs, scholars, and even several adepts to be able to glean, through careful crosschecking, any interpretations that might be commonly shared among the privileged few. But it is just as possible that I might have simply not yet tracked down the true founts of knowledge.

However, a few meagre provisions for the voyage: Black indicates the world's night. Blue refers to consciousness—clearer and clearer, purer and purer. Spirals and arrows symbolize energy. Triangles pointing downward depict the Goddess.

There appears to be neither the slimmest insightful study on these paintings nor the briefest written testimony born from a guided practice of their "visualization," of their active contemplation. To learn more, it would be necessary to learn Sanskrit in order to read and translate the manuscripts that contain these "illustrations." And then to experience the meditation according to the rules, under the guidance of one who knows, a guru. Here and now, ours are the steps of a passionate amateur.

Luckily, the tradition isn't so restrictive, nor so foolish. For in addition to the knowledge of Sanskrit and ritual experience, it is also a question of "having an eye."

There are also some, in the West as well as in India, who recommend prudence. After all, these pieces are basically tools of inner practice, and it would be inappropriate if too many were presented in galleries and museums, thus associating them too directly with an aesthetic. They aren't entirely wrong, but it's not quite so simple. Especially as the tradition has always claimed that beauty is a reflection of the divine and that an echo of the loftiest reality should also be made visible according to the highest "plastic" criteria.

It isn't forbidden to find them beautiful, these marvels, even if their destiny is actually to guide and aid one's meditation. Their sole purpose remains to open up the mind of the one who gazes at them, leading to a more acute level of consciousness, and ultimately awakening. In that case, doesn't another kind of beauty appear?



We speak of beauty. Perhaps instead, they evoke a kind of truth. Surely because they reveal, in their very abstraction, certain kinds of thoughts—thoughts that have chosen, instead of words, to express themselves in lines, shapes, and colors.

In one of his books, Ajit Mookerjee, referring to these pieces, speaks of a “visual metaphysics.”

\*

One thing is certain—the little that I have understood, that I have misunderstood the least—has been gathered, over time, in the field. From a subtle hint. Spoken. Or a glint in the eye. A gesture or a nod expressing admiration or rejection—in short whether a particular piece is any good, whether it has any power to conduct, like copper wire, or not. And to ferry even ignorant fools like us across.

However, I have known some who went too quickly over there—apparently because they didn’t have the time. (Better to stay two or three weeks on the same street without going too far afield, in India or elsewhere.) One spring afternoon, I remember, a few years ago, in a large apartment overlooking a canal, in a town in Holland, someone showed me an entire collection of such pieces gathered hastily in the delicious and blind excitement that leads a foreigner to make rash, and too easy, purchases—all travelers from rich countries know what I am talking about. Having showed me his collection, he was still exhilarated, still seemed to be as proud of his booty as on the day he bought it. And yet it was rather pathetic, this treasure, I assure you, soulless and lifeless. Dead butterflies pinned in cases.

\*

Let’s return to the first gesture.

Imagine. Suddenly, after weeks, months, perhaps years of evoking the Goddess (for example), her arms, legs, her protruding tongue and frightful gaze, all suddenly resolved into a simple triangle pointing downwards.

To abstract. Abbreviate. To finally glimpse the whole.

After the first shudder of delight, everything occurs beyond eyeshot, much deeper. Everything happens when that which is already only a reflection, the glimmer of the seen,

*lands  
without the slightest sound  
in the spirit.*

Continue looking at them, untiringly, these images. They are somewhat rigid, a bit studious, almost too restrained. And yet, nearly all tremble. But that too depends on who is looking at them. For any work, a kind of family is necessary. A mother and a father, at least. A mother: the painter; a father: the viewer.

Some are black, some red, some brown, some yellow, some multicolored, that’s true. Yet if we had but one color to associate with them forever, it would be blue. Sky blue. The blue of consciousness. Azure.

Painted silences. Nothing extraneous. Not the slightest impression of effort. Just a certain discreet but sure perfection.

*Wild little things  
That shine  
Obstinately*

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We will voluntarily omit the Buddhist Tantric art of the Himalayas, Nepal and Tibet, which differs culturally from that of the Indian subcontinent.

<sup>2</sup> One of India’s religions, which places special emphasis on nonviolence.

<sup>3</sup> Formulas that are repeated “millions of times” and that contain, in phonetic form, the energy and power of the divinity.

<sup>4</sup> The cosmic energy coiled within each of us at the base of the spine.

<sup>5</sup> We are therefore as far away as possible from classical Hindu Vedanta, according to which the world is only an illusion.

<sup>6</sup> In Tantrism, the “five M’s” are allowed: meat, fish, alcohol, roasted grains, and sex (in Sanskrit these five words all start with an “m”).

<sup>7</sup> In any case, in Rajasthan, where all the pieces presented here originated.

<sup>8</sup> This was in 1989 during the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition at Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris.



## UNTITLED OR PERHAPS SKY

### Variations on a Single Form: The Shiva Linga

I say sky.<sup>1</sup>

I would like to write it, someday.

Upon actually experiencing it, once and for all.

(A scholar in Rajasthan, Udaipur to be exact, provided most of the paintings of Shiva linga for these exhibitions.<sup>2</sup> He had been collecting them for almost forty years, is still searching for and finding them. A passion. I gained access to his treasure in the late 90s, visiting his little white house in the center of town, thanks to an old friend. Five years must have gone by until this gentleman slowly came around to my idea: to one day exhibit these unique works on this side of the world. It should also be noted that only a few months before the original exhibition, he sent about thirty pieces, actually less than a tenth of what he had lovingly collected over all those years. What's more, when asked if he would like his name to appear in the exhibition catalogue, he never replied. A discreet man, in fact rather guarded.)

How much they convey, these Shiva linga.

How skillful and subtle and magical the repetition when placed one after the other on any surface.

"Signs of god," André Padoux calls them. André Padoux, the great researcher whose thought, language, manners, and ways are all so demanding and elegant; the author of that unforgettable book *L'Énergie de la Parole* (*The Energy of Speech*), which sadly appears to have been largely ignored by contemporary specialists and amateurs of poetry since its publication in 1980,<sup>3</sup>

in a way my teacher, and such a fine one at that, even if I was never formally his student (because for that a knowledge of Sanskrit would have been required, which unfortunately was lacking), yet I will always be grateful that he never smirked, quite to the contrary, at my research—however crude and marginal—in the field of abstract Tantric paintings from Rajasthan, investigations actually based primarily on information gathered from conversations with the practitioners themselves, the *tantrikas*, as there really isn't any literature or writing on this specific subject, except in the illustrated volumes by Ajit Mookerjee and his students,

although these don't really teach us anything of import about the precise meaning of these particular paintings,

this entire project led under the seal of a promise perhaps not of pure secrecy but at least of extreme reserve, the enduring pursuit of this study having come to me paradoxically from the brutal interruption of the very first steps of this quest, on the road between Delhi and Jaipur, in 1985, and the long absence that followed, then the green light to return and continue the job several years later which gave me the chance to meet a soothsayer, already well on in years, who, odder still, bore the same family name as our scholar, and in the same town,

green light then, but granted on the express condition that this search be carried out in complete discretion, if not total confidentiality, this strange improvised spiritual advisor saying that though I had almost certainly paid some sort of tribute with my accident on the road to Jaipur, it was nevertheless still wise to remain prudent, then having me wash my hands in a large bowl of sand, and examining, at length, both the sand and my hands, before finally approving the pursuit of my task . . .

Fine. Things are different now. Although we were, perhaps, just about to get lost in the meanderings of an endless sentence. Actually what I also wanted to point out was that these marks of Shiva are particularly varied. This small collection of Shiva linga<sup>4</sup> is, basically, composed of classical pieces: vertical ovoid shapes, for all intents and purposes monochromes, but also several more eccentric brothers and sisters (our Rajasthani adepts of the discipline appear to have sometimes taken a bit of liberty with the canon; theoretically they are not artists, and yet they are, without realizing it):

black sky constellated with bursting blue stars;

sky-mask bearing the hint of eyes, or of a mouth, or perhaps both;

indigo sky circled by a thread that sometimes changes color along the way;

sky-bird-king, as if mad, crowned, with a very round eye and short white beak;

brown sky surrounded by a pink or red halo spread without the least concern.

A few things to keep in mind:

The Shiva linga is only one of the designs within the abstract Tantric vocabulary of Rajasthan, of which there appear to be about fifty in all, I mean fifty different ones that appeal to our Western eyes accustomed as they are to contemporary or modern art.

Each of these images has its own particular, fixed meaning. A spiral represents energy; blue: consciousness; an inverted black triangle: the goddess Kali, who is one of the avatars of Shakti, Shiva's "companion," etc.



Even if Indian aesthetes have always collected them, simply because they find them remarkably beautiful, the main purpose of these paintings, and in fact of their entire vocabulary, is actually meditation. They are also used for visualization. For example, you get up in the morning. Then, almost immediately: face-to-face with the thing, for several minutes. Until it has filled your mind, right to the top, until it has slowly eliminated everything else. Then you come back to the world, attend to your daily affairs. With the difference that, when you want to, you can instantly recall the image in your mind, and what's more, you can re-create its entire world, namely the image itself enriched by its constellation, in short all that it precisely signified augmented by what it has produced, given rise to, released within you, as crystalline and operative as in the morning.

Three more details, born from observation:

On paper, the blots and splatters, the patched holes and tears, all the various anomalies appear to have been appreciated and used by our "painters" in an almost systematic fashion. A sign, in any case, of their plastic know-how, whether deliberate or not.

On some pieces three spots can be found, often clear, which symbolize the presence of the three *gunas* (matter, energy and essence), they themselves being the repetition of the three states of consciousness (creation, preservation and destruction), the three prongs of Shiva's *trishula*, his renowned trident.

At other times, under the main form, a second *linga* can be seen, quite small. Acting as a more practical aid for memorization, or perhaps simply the mother's child. Which above all should remind us that the image is always destined to be reproduced, always ruminated, both within us and upon its support.

I continue to say "sky."

Not without reason.

A simple reason.

Far from any perfect square, any rope taut to the point of breaking.

A kind of fluid reason.

Watery reason.

Since, besides invisible and yet present (the most impressive) Shiva *linga*, other entirely liquid ones in fact exist, as André Padoux informs us.

So here, on this side of the world, an ever so slow approach on how to use these pieces. If not

for meditation or visualization, then at least for observation. An intense observation. Which slowly dissolves into contemplation. Deep. Boundless.

Then one rises.

Step by step.

While this thought reappears, which I first had long ago, in the bloom of youth, but which has never left me, and which Jean François Billeter<sup>5</sup> suddenly rekindled, even intensified:

Under the canopy that is a cloud, under the cloud of passing time, which flows endlessly, constantly spinning its thread, rarely golden, often leaden,

it seems to me that there are what could be called speeds, levels in the intensity of energy that animates all human activity;

that we all happen to pass, from time to time, on the purely human and real and tangible staircase, from the step of the man within man to that of the sky within man,

upon a chance encounter with love, with a shock or fascination, with ecstasy of course, even if only the result of a spin of the wheel, with miraculous conversations, with the contemplation too of any artwork—these authentic little tigers, for example, these Shiva *linga* on paper.

Refrain: from the step of man to that of the sky.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> [Translator's note] The French word *ciel* here could also be translated as "heaven," but in the Oriental sense of Heaven and Earth as one might find referred to in Taoist texts. However, in Tibetan Buddhism and certain texts of Kashmiri Shaivism we also find reference to the sky as a symbol for the essential openness and emptiness of our nondual nature.

<sup>2</sup> Exhibitions of a series of Shiva *linga* took place at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, in Paris, May-June 2005, and again at Feature Gallery, New York, October 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Published by Le Soleil Noir, Paris (it has since been republished, in 1994 by Fata Morgana). Those interested may want to consult Padoux's major text, *Vāc, The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), translated by Jacques Gontier.

<sup>4</sup> See the catalogues which accompanied the exhibitions mentioned in note 2. These are listed in the bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> When I read and reread, I don't know how many times, his luminous lessons on Chuang Tzu (*Leçons sur Tchouang-tseu*. Paris: Éditions Allia, 2002).



## INDEX OF WORKS

All works are anonymous. The tantrikas use various media (watercolor, tempera, gouache, ink, hand-made colors) on salvaged paper, which is often between twenty and eighty years old. The date of the drawing, the location of the tantrika who made it, and its dimensions (in inches, height by width) are listed below according to plate number.

1	1998	Near Samode	8 x 13
2	1997	Jodphur	13 3/4 x 8 7/8
3	2008	Jodphur	13 5/8 x 8 7/8
4	2008	Near Udaipur	15 1/8 x 10 1/4
5	1999	Near Udaipur	13 x 8 7/8
6	1998	Near Jaipur	13 1/2 x 8 3/4
7	1998	Near Jaipur	13 1/2 x 8 3/4
8	1997	Chomu	13 3/4 x 8 3/4
9	2007	Bikaner	13 5/8 x 9
10	1995	Jaipur	12 5/8 x 8 1/2
11	2001	Saganur	9 1/4 x 11 3/4
12	1994	Udaipur	13 1/2 x 9
13	2005	Near Sanganer	13 x 9 7/8
14	2009	Sanganer	12 1/8 x 8 3/4
15	1995	Jodphur	9 1/4 x 13 3/4
16	2003	Udaipur	13 5/8 x 9
17	2008	Jaipur	13 x 9 7/8
18	2002	Bikaner	14 x 10
19	1990	Jaipur	12 1/2 x 11 1/2
20	1997	Udaipur	13 3/4 x 9
21	2007	Udaipur	13 1/8 x 9

22	1989	Bikaner	9 1/4 x 13 3/8
23	1985	Jaipur	7 3/4 x 6 7/8
24	1985	Jaipur	7 3/4 x 6 7/8
25	1985	Jaipur	7 3/4 x 7
26	1985	Jaipur	7 3/4 x 6 7/8
27	2003	Udaipur	13 1/8 x 8 3/4
28	1993	Jaipur	9 1/8 x 7
29	2000	Sanganer & Delhi	14 x 9 1/8
30	2000	Sanganer & Delhi	14 x 9 1/4
31	2008	Udaipur	13 7/8 x 9 1/8
32	1999	Udaipur	13 x 10 1/4
33	2000	Near Jaipur	13 3/4 x 8 3/4
34	2006	Near Samode	12 5/8 x 10 1/4
35	2006	Near Samode	12 3/4 x 9 7/8
36	1990	Near Jaipur	9 3/8 x 15 1/4
37	2001	Jaipur	13 7/8 x 9 1/2
38	2000	Jaipur	11 x 10
39	2007	Chomu	13 1/2 x 8 7/8

## DETAILS

Pages 90 - 91	Top row, left to right, details from plates 22, 27, 39, and 7 Bottom row, left to right, details from plates 31, 10, 2, and 10
Pages 92 - 93	Left to right, details from plates 18, 35, 33, and 2
Pages 94 - 95	Left to right, details from plates 8, 5, 29, and 27
Page 96	Detail from plate 37



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### Exhibition Catalogues

(All exhibitions curated by Franck André Jamme, except Searchlight which was curated by Lawrence Rinder at the California College of Arts & Crafts.)

*Field of Color: Tantra Drawings from India* (Drawing Papers 50). New York: The Drawing Center, 2004.

*L'Inde, marges: dessins tantriques* (Carnets d'études 2). Paris: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2005.

*Searchlight: Consciousness at the Millenium*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1999.

*Shiva Linga*. New York: Feature Inc., 2008.

*Tantra*. Paris: Galerie du Jour Agnès b., 1994.

### Related Books & Writings

(Except for the above catalogues, there is little information published on the abstract Tantric paintings reproduced here; however, the following books may be useful for those wishing to learn more about the general background and symbolism of Tantra.)

Evola, Julius. *The Yoga of Power: Tantra, Shakti and the Secret Way*. Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1992.

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