

Mughal Miniature Painting: A Mirror to Early Mughal Empire in India

Prof. Pintu Mandal

Assistant Professor of History

Rampurhat College

Abstract:

Mughal painting is a miniature style of painting that was influenced by the Persian and European aesthetic styles and developed under the patronage of Mughal emperors in India. From sixteenth to nineteenth century the Mughal miniature flourished as book illustrations and as albums of painting. From a historical point of view Mughal miniature paintings reflect the life and works of different Mughal rulers, while representing significant events and personalities associated with their milieus. This paper attempts to focus on the first phase of Mughal painting that lasted from 1526 to 1707 and it analyzes how Mughal miniatures mirror the lives and exploits of first six Mughal emperors in India namely, Babar, Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb.

Keywords:

Mughal Empire, miniature, manuscript, illustration, calligraphy, patronage, artist.

Introduction:

Mughal painting is a miniature style of painting that was influenced by the Persian and European aesthetic styles and developed under the patronage of Mughal emperors in India. From sixteenth to nineteenth century the Mughal miniature flourished as book illustrations and as albums of painting. The Mughals were invaders to India and they brought Persian artists along with them. The Persian style was a mixture of Assyrian, Bactrian, Indian and Chinese styles. This cultural mingling was possible due to commercial interaction along the Silk-Route. Thus according to Vaishnavi & Ramya, "Mughal paintings began to emerge in the 16th century having a fusion of Indian and Persian styles of paintings" (Vaishnavi 19). The Mughal painting developed as illustrations of different manuscripts and as individual albums containing standalone portraits of the Mughal royals. Some of the important illustrated or illuminated manuscripts of the Mughal period are: *Tutinamah*, *Hamzanamah*, *Babarnamah*, *Akbarnamah*, *Harivansha*, and *Rajamnamah*. The albums were known as 'Muraqqas' that included either the great exploits of the Mughal rulers or the portrait of the emperors along with his close associates and consorts. Thus we find portraits of Jahangir, NurJahan or DaraSikoh. All these manuscripts were collection of short stories, exploits and welfare activities of Mughal Emperors and retelling of Indian epics. Though Mughal paintings originated as illustrations to these texts, it gradually emerged as self-sufficient studies of Nature: flowers, plants, birds, animals and as skillful

portraiture of the Mughal royals. The Mughal miniature style flourished in Oudh, Hyderabad, Faizabad, Delhi and were subsequently conveyed to Murshidabad and Patna. Lubor Hajek in his study on Moghul art has rightly pointed out that Mughal art was “the product of Imperial patronage. It took some thirty of forty years for it to take root, and after further years of careful tending it grew into a plant of such toughness that it was able to withstand the vicissitudes of two hundred years of Indian history to put out offshoots, and, simply, to survive” (Hajek 10).

The Aesthetic Taste of Babar:

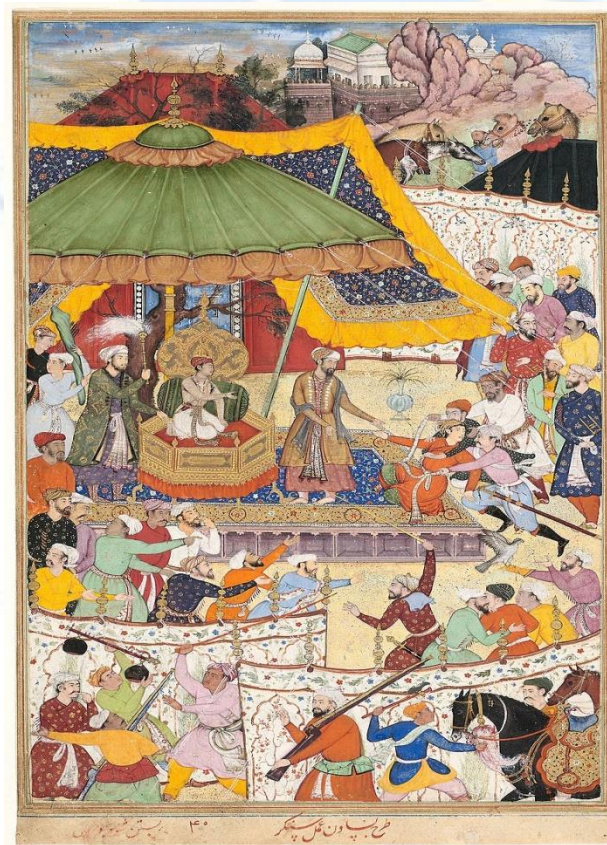
Babar(1483-1530) invaded India around 1525 and he had a brief stint of kingship in this land. However, he was an avid admirer of art and he took initiative in the development of the fine arts during his tenure. He loved the works of the famous Persian miniaturist Bihzad and called him ‘a gem among the artists’ in his anecdotes. However, according to Percy Brown, it is “the earlier Mughal emperors ---- Humayun and Akbar -- - introduced the art of miniature painting into Hindustan from Persia. ... From the nature of this movement it may be termed the ‘Persianization’ of Northern India” (Brown 18).

Humayun’s Artistic Inclination:

Emperor Humayun (1508-1556) inherited his father’s aesthetic sense. Though he was dethroned by Sher-Shah in the year 1540 and led the life of a fugitive till 1555, his interest in art never withered. While fleeing from India Humayun met the budding Persian artist Mir Sayyid Ali in Tabriz. Mir Sayyidof Tabriz Ali along with another important miniaturist Abdus Samad of Shiraz joined Humayun’s court in Kabul in 1550s. They are regarded as the founders of the Mughal School of art in India. In their works “The versatility of Persian compositions accommodates the maximum amount of descriptive detail, whilst responding to the need for recession and depth. Interlocking and overlapping figures, painted in vivid flat colours, and the extensive use of gold, give the painting a heightened intensity” (Vaishnavi & Ramya 20). The Emperor though exiled and under poverty, never lost his love for the fine arts and he commissioned Mir Sayyid Ali to embark on a series of narrative paintings known as *Dastan-i-Amir-Hamza*. AamirHamza was the uncle of the prophet Hazrat Muhammad. Humayun wanted to present this album of paintings to his pregnant wife. The album was planned to have 12 sections, each section containing a hundred paintings, painted on soft handmade cloth, as paper was not easily available at that time. This was a mammoth project, which could not be completed very soon. In the meantime Humayun’s wife died during her childbirth and the emperor dedicated the first section of this album to his late wife. Even Humayun could not see its complete version in his lifetime and he requested his son Akbar to finish his dream project. This incident shows Emperor Humayun’s keen interest on in art that probably laid the foundation of Mughal narrative painting in India. In these narrative paintings a popular storyline was expressed through a series of eventful paintings and these frames were often accompanied by calligraphic rendition of that story, inserted within the paintings or decorating the borderline of those images. The entire manuscript was called an ‘illuminated manuscript’. Many such albums were created under Emperor Akbar and Emperor Jahangir’s patronage.

Persian and Indian Artists Collaborate in Akbar's Court:

Emperor Akbar (1542-1605) was known to be an unlettered man, but had an immense eagerness to know the world: the nature with its flora and fauna, the history and culture of people, and different streams of knowledge on this earth. Along with this eagerness, he had humility of the heart to receive and accept knowledge and had a sharp understanding and memory. Instead of learning through the letters, he attempted to learn through images and that is why he took initiative to document all these diversities of nature, events of history and cultural activities and folk traditions of the land in paintings. His court was a storehouse of myriad talents from the fields of philosophy, music, literature and art. Akbar took an initiative to introduce the Persian miniaturists to the Hindu painters and under his patronage the Persians and the Hindu artists worked in collaboration. Thus during the reign of Akbar a cultural coordination was made between the culture of Persia and that of traditional India: "In a variety of the forms of human activity that ensued, a combination of Persian and Indian elements is observable; in literature, art, architecture, industries, in the planning of their gardens, even down to fruit cultivation, the best that the two countries could offer was utilized" (Brown 19). Hence Mir Sayyid Ali, Abdus Samad worked with Basawan, Dashyant and Keshudas. The paintings of this period portray Indian natural beauty with trees, flowers, birds and animals as backdrops of the main subjects within the frame. Akbar's era saw the making of some important illustrated manuscripts.



The Court of Akbar, From *Akbarnama*, by Basawan, Source: *Wikipedia*

A list of those with tentative dates follows in Abul Fazal's *Ain-i-Akbari* (16th Century):

1. *Tutinama* (A collection of Indian and West Asian folktales, painted in 1560-65 on soft cotton cloth)
2. *Hamzanama* (Stories from the life of Amir Hamza, the Prophet's uncle, painted between 1562-77 on soft cotton cloth)
3. *Babarnama* (Life and exploits of Emperor Babar, completed in 1589 on paper)
4. *Akbarnama* (Life and exploits of Emperor Akbar, completed about 1590 on paper)
5. *Harivansha* (Stories from the life of Sri Krishna, completed about 1590)
6. *Rajamnama* (Stories from the *Mahabharata*, completed around 1598)



A Battle Scene from *Hamzanama*, Source: Wikipedia

Some famous artists of Akbar's period are Abdus Samad, Abul Hasan, Aka Riza, Akil Khan, Basawan, Bhavanidas, Vichitra, Bihzad, Bishendas, Dashyant, Gobardhan, Kamal Kashmiri, Keshu Khurd, Manohar, Mansur, Mir Sayyid Ali, Mishkin, Nainsukh, Ruknuddin, Sahibdin, Sudarshan and Ranjha. Hajek observes,

Akbar's death in 1605 after a reign of fifty years brought about a change of emphasis in Mughal painting. In the period marked by the reign of his son, Jahangir (1605-1627), and grandson, Shah Jahan (1627-1658), the illustration of manuscripts became of lesser concern and interest was focused on the production of pictures of albums. (Hajek 18)

While Akbar's reign was marked by the illustrations of classical Persian literature, representation of historical events and depiction of heroic characters from epics and folktales, the eras of Jahangir and Shah Jahan were marked by the art of portraiture of both royal lords and ladies, study of animal, birds and flowers.

Jahangir's Love for Art:

Akbar also trained his son Prince Selim, aka Jahangir (1569-1627) in art appreciation. He appointed his courtier Abdur Rahim Khankhanan to make an illustrated manuscript of *Ramayana* and to train Prince Jahangir in art appreciation. Under his guidance Jahangir became a trained connoisseur of art and he was interested in the study of nature and portraiture. He was interested in Christianity as well and he collected European paintings. His memoir *Tuzk-e-Jahangiri* contains references to his artistic endeavours. Vaishnavi & Ramya, in their Analysis of Mughal Miniatures pointed out,

Jahangir was also deeply influenced by European painting. During his reign, he came into direct contact with the English crown and was sent the gift of oil paintings, which included portraits of King and Queen. He encouraged his royal atelier to take up the single point perspective favoured by European artists, unlike the flattened multi-layered style used in traditional miniatures. He particularly encouraged paintings that depicted events of his own life, individual portraits, and studies of birds, flowers and animals. (Vaishnavi & Ramya 21)

Some of the most successful artists of his period are Ustad Anant, Nadir-ul-Zaman, Mansur, Muhammad Ali, Ustad Mishkin, Masood, Hunhar, Ustad Modi, Vichitra, Gobardhan, and Hasim. Many of them subsequently excelled in their fields under the patronage of Emperor Shah Jahan.



Portrait of NurJahan, Source: *Wikipedia*

The Watershed of Mughal Miniature under Shah Jahan's Patronage:

The era of Emperor Shah Jahan (1592-1666) witnessed the watershed of Mughal miniature painting. Artists, who worked at the courts of Shah Jahan's predecessors, not only had encouragement from their royal mentors, but enjoyed all the facilities for pursuing their artistic inclination. Emperor Shah Jahan maintained this legacy and kept all these artists in his court. The *Muraqqas* that were painted during this time contained portraits not only of Emperor Shah Jahan, but also his dear courtiers and beautiful courtly ladies. Among Shah Jahan's four sons, the eldest one, Prince Dara Shikoh inherited his father's aesthetic taste and he had a separate painting workshop that was graced by the famous miniaturist of the period Manohar and Muhammad Khan.



A Portrait of Dara Shikoh, Source: *Wikipedia*

Among them Manohar became famous since the era of Akbar. Apart from them Ramdas and Bulchand also worked under Prince Dara's patronage. The *Muraqqa* created under Dara Shikoh's name was gifted by Dara to his favourite Begham Nadira Banu in the 1630s. The album contains a beautiful portrayal of Prince Dara's favourite horse 'Dilpasand'.

Emperor Shah Jahan's workshop witnessed the execution of *ragamala* series of paintings as well, which suggests the interaction of the Mughal and Rajput styles of painting. In these *raagmala* paintings the time, mood and essence of the Indian ragas were represented through certain characters, primarily Radha and Krishna. Shah Jahan's era saw the beginning and the end of the Great period of Mughal painting, as Percy Brown has rightly pointed out: "In a word one detects behind all the lavish display which is the main characteristic of the painting under Shah Jahan, that sense of over-ripeness which is the sure sign of decline" (Brown 149).

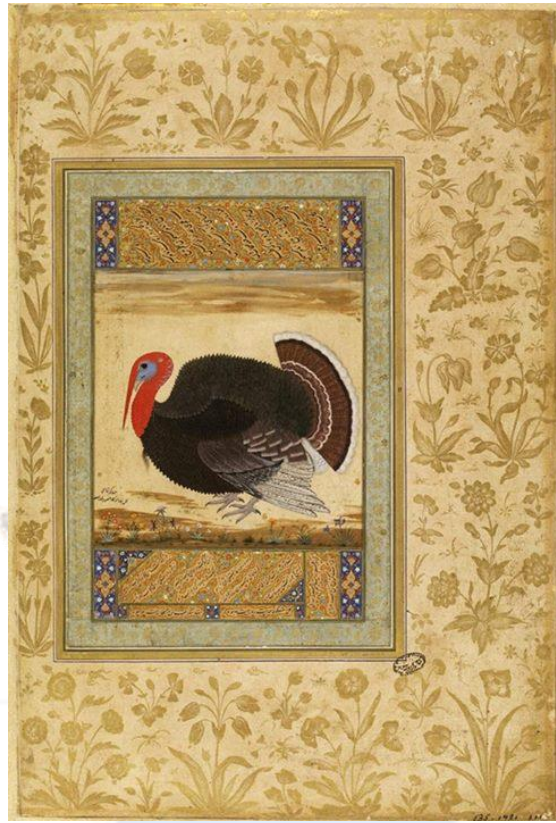
The Decline of Mughal Miniature under Aurangzeb:

Shah Jahan's successor to the Mughal throne, Aurangzeb (1618-1707) did not show much interest in artistic activities and hence during his tenure the art of portraiture lost its popularity. The court painters who excelled under the appreciative mentorship of Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan, were discouraged by the disinterestedness of Aurangzeb. However, there existed still some well-known painters such as, Khemananda, Raghunandan, Ray Chitaraman, Madhuputra Iliyas Bahadur, Gyanchand, Anup Chattar, Ray Fat Chand, Hunhar, Chhatmal, Ray Chatamal, Ustad Gulab Roy, Chet, Afjal Ali Khan, Masud, and Lachhman Singh. In this way the first phase of Mughal miniatures gradually receded due to Aurangzeb's lack of interest in the fine arts.



Prince Dara Shikoh with his Army, Source: *Wikipedia*

The Mughal miniatures mostly depict crowded court-scenes, marriage processions, hunting parties of the royals and scenes from battles. The predominant colours in Mughal miniature were red, yellow, green and blue. This particular shade of blue was derived from the stone-dust of Lapis lazuli and the attires of the royal persons were painted with flakes of gold. Another very significant feature of Mughal miniatures is the application of calligraphy at the brim of the paintings. These calligraphic writing resembled painting and complemented the images. Mughal paintings were predominated by pictures of exotic birds and animals. Most of these birds and animals were presented to the Mughal Emperors by the European visitors to the royal court. Jahangir in his *Tuzk-e-Jahangiri* writes an anecdote regarding a turkey bird that was presented at his court by the Portuguese visitors from Goa. Jahangir gives a vivid depiction of the bird, which was later painted by his artists.



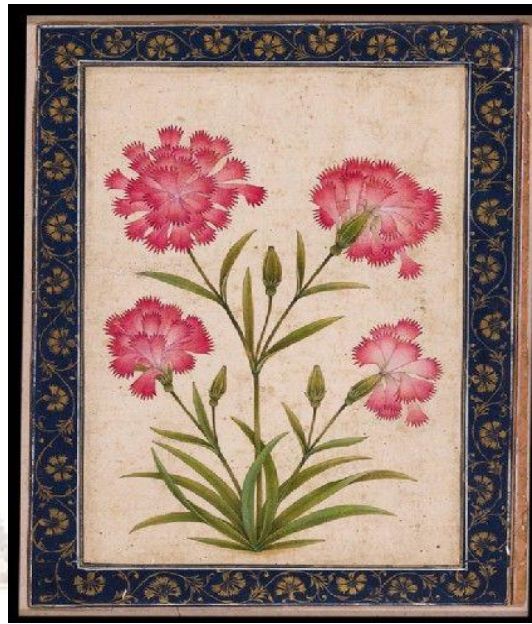
Portrait of a Turkey Cock, presented to Emperor Jahangir, painted with gold, Source: *Wikipedia*

Likewise, tigers, lions, horses and elephants dominate the hunting scenes of the Mughal era. Hunting was a favourite theme of the Mughal artist. Even the marriage processions were populated by beautifully decorated elephants and horses.



A Portrait of Shah Jahan on his Horse with decorative frame, by Payag, Source: *Wikipedia*

Jahangir also encouraged the study of exotic flowers like wild poppies, lily, daisy and narcissus. Most of these exotic flowers were applied as frames to the main paintings. The decorative frames thus form another defining feature of Mughal miniatures. A lot of Flower Studies were made during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan. Jahangir had a knack for botanical wonders and took a particular interest in exotic birds and animals. This objectivity and accuracy in the study of nature was the basic characteristic of Mughal miniature.



Study of an Exotic Flower, Dianthas in Mughal Painting, Source: *Wikipedia*

The most significant contribution of Mughal miniature painting to Indian Art is portraiture. Since photography was not invented those days, these paintings serve as visual documentation of the lives of the Great Mughals. The portraits of Akbar, Jahangir, NurJahan, Shah Jahan, Dara Shikoh or Aurangzeb give a vivid idea of their characters. Most of these portraits were painted in profiles and their heads were encircled by a golden halo, suggesting their regalia.

The rapid growth and excellence of Mughal miniature was due to a generous and enthusiastic royal patronage as Hajek observes, “The Emperor’s direct interest and initiative were probably among the determining factors in the development of the Mughal miniature during the third quarter of the 16th century (Hajek 60) ... “In its evolution the Mughal miniature reacted very sensitively to changes in its political and economic environment. Imperial patronage played the decisive role in its development” (Hajek 65). Thus from a historical point of view, Mughal miniature paintings reflect the life and works of different Mughal rulers, while representing significant events and personalities associated with their milieus. Unlike traditional Indian art of the Buddhist and the Hindu tradition, where each flower, tree, animal or object carried a symbolic purport (just as lotus or the Pipul tree, the symbol of Buddha, the flute and the peacock, the symbol of Krishna, the trident, the symbol of Shiva), the Mughal miniature was non-symbolic. It did not portray a reality it could not see. The Mughal art was objective and documentary in Nature and that is why it served as the ideal mirror to the early Mughal Empire in India.

Works Cited:

Brown, Percy. *Indian Painting under the Mughals, A.D. 1550-1750*. 1913. Cosmo Publications, 1987.

Hajek, Lubor. *Indian Miniatures of the Moghul School*. Spring Books, 1960.

Mitra, Ashok. *Bharater Chitrakala*. Vol 1. Ananda Publishers Pvt.Ltd. 1956.

Vaishnavi P. & Ramya B. “Mughal Miniature Paintings: An Analysis.” *Kristu Jayanti Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*. Volume 2, 2022. pp. 19–25.

Wikipedia.org.