

Aspects of Mughal Miniature Painting: A Thematic Perspective



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Abstract: *This study explores the intellectual and artistic diversity of Mughal painting by examining its fundamental visual traditions thematically. By avoiding a strictly historical or stylistic analysis, the paper explores how, in the Mughal court, artistic expression was employed to build imperial identity, aesthetic refinement, and scientific research. Through the use of certain themes, such as naturalistic representations, calligraphic motifs, marginal decoration, and portraits. The purpose of the research is to uncover the multi-layered meanings present in Mughal visual culture. The research emphasizes how these themes fulfilled ideological, spiritual, and documentary roles in addition to decorative ones by using primary materials and visual analysis.*

Keywords: Mughal painting, visual traditions, aesthetic refinement, calligraphic, portraits

Introduction

The Mughals were nature lovers and their love for fauna and flora has been expressed in different periods in different manners. Babar, the prince of Memoirs, has expressed his interest in fauna scribing anything unusual that he saw.

Humayun was also a nature lover and an art lover himself, but unfortunately he never had the chance to settle down. He was very soft hearted people took advantage of him. When he finally settled down and established his rule, God didn't give him the time to enjoy luxuries such as art and he died soon Humayun's servant, Jauhar Aftabchi, described an occasion when a fine white bird caught the emperor's attention. Humayun caught it, cut off its wings, ordered an artist to paint it, and then released it—showing both imperial curiosity and the Mughal desire to document nature (Seyller, 1997). The Mughals, out of their passion for nature, commissioned

their artists to paint anything rare—be it a bird or animal—not merely for aesthetic pleasure, but also to record and share this knowledge with those who could not observe such wonders firsthand (Beach, 2011). These illustrations were often preserved in albums and manuscripts, reflecting the emperor's pride in possessing exotic creatures and their likenesses (Goswamy, 2012).

Akbar, although illiterate, had an exceptional memory and was said to name numerous animals and birds in one go. Jahangir maintained his own private deer park filled with deer, nilgai, antelopes, and other beautiful animals and birds, which served as frequent subjects for court painters (Koch, 1997). Natural history paintings were a fundamental genre within Mughal painting, and artists were expected to render animals and birds with scientific accuracy. Every detail—from the curve of the spine to the

texture of fur or feathers—had to be captured, reflecting an early form of empirical documentation (Losty & Roy).

Jahangir was especially interested in the realistic depiction of animals, and he demanded anatomical accuracy and emotional expression in their representation. He even believed that painting animals was more challenging than human portraits due to the complexity of bodily proportions and the subtlety of natural movement (Koch, 2006). These naturalistic depictions were of great value and could have benefited contemporary zoologists, had such a scientific community been established then. The Mughal court painters—like Mansur—were highly skilled and capable of making rapid field sketches, which were later transformed into polished and exquisite miniatures (Okada, 1992). These albums of fauna were like mini zoos, containing detailed visual records of the empire's encounters with the natural world.

This paper implements a **thematic approach** to discover the intellectual and aesthetic formation that these paintings symbolize. Rather than unraveling stylistic schools or historical phases, the care lies on recurring subjects and their significance, revealing how the Mughals experiential themselves and the world around them.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study highlights the deeper thematic patterns of Mughal paintings, which are frequently appreciated for their aesthetic beauty. The research advances a more comprehensive knowledge of Mughal art as a complex language of ideas, politics, and cosmology by dissecting its intellectual and aesthetic layers. It provides fresh viewpoints that are beneficial to academics studying visual culture, art history, South Asian studies, and comparative aesthetics.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the multiple meanings that were conveyed by visual components such as nature, figures, script, and margins.
2. To investigate Mughal paintings as ideological, observational, and expressive mediums.

3. To draw attention to how thematic content's aesthetics, symbolism, and cultural context interact.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive design grounded in historical contextualization to explore the visual dimensions of Mughal miniature painting. Sources such as *Akbarnama*, *Tuzuk-e-Jahangiri*, and *Padshahnama*, the research locates the artworks within their cultural and political settings. Through thematic interpretation that investigates the symbolism inserted in the paintings, the artistic intent behind their creation, and the ways in which they were acknowledged by contemporary audiences. Central to this analysis is the role of calligraphy, Decorative borders as narrative devices, flora and fauna as expressions of imperial interest and a broader encyclopedic vision and at last Portraiture is examined as a powerful tool used to declare imperial authority, convey ranked structures, and precise individual character. The Mughal emperors' engagement with and documentation of the natural world will be keenly observed and documented by the researcher.

PORTRAITURE

Portraiture as a branch of art holds a dominant place in Asian art, and it was widely appreciated and supported during the Mughal reign in India. The Mughal Emperors inherited a passion for portraiture from their Mongol ancestors, who were deeply interested in perpetuating their legacy through images of themselves (Beach, 2011). The Central Asian Khans, fascinated by the crude stone effigies of their forefathers, later commanded skilled painters to capture their characteristics in more refined visual forms, especially after interacting with advanced artistic traditions (Verma, 1994).

Although early portraits from the Mongol era show scenes of fighting and feasting, they were not very sophisticated. In India, however, portraiture already had a strong presence in both ancient and pre-Mughal traditions (Goswamy, 2012). With the establishment of the Mughal court, portraiture became a popular genre among

artists who worked in imperial ateliers and were occasionally salaried. Mughal rulers like Babur were known for their descriptive pen-portraits, which vividly portrayed both physical and psychological characteristics of individuals, as seen in his *Baburnama* (Thackston, 2002). For instance, Babur's account of Sultan Husain describes his physique, temperament, and dress, and while Babur admired Behzad's artistry, he noted that Behzad "did not draw young beardless faces well" (Thackston, 2002, p. 28).

Jahangir, like his forebears, combined literary skill with visual sensibility. He once recorded a detailed pen-portrait of Akbar, describing his complexion, face, body structure, and limbs, suggesting the emperor's deep understanding of portraiture aesthetics (Smith, 1985). The Mughal rulers encouraged a fusion of Persian and Indian techniques, resulting in a unique hybrid style of portraiture (Beach, 2011). The tradition of rendering portraits extended to figures from Persian culture as well, including expert visualizations of Iranian poets like Jalaluddin Rumi and Saadi, based on historical texts (Khandalavala & Chandra, 1969).

The Mughal atelier surpassed its Persian counterpart in the number and quality of portraits produced. Portraits of Akbar's nine jewels—Abul Fazl, Faizi, Tansen, Todar Mal, Birbal, and others—were painted with great care, and many of them survive in museum collections today (Verma, 1994). Portraiture under Akbar and Jahangir expanded to include not only royalty but also courtiers, musicians, commoners, and even animals such as elephants and horses. These portraits, often collected in albums, symbolized a revival of the dead and immortalization of the living (Goswamy, 2012).

The House of Timur portrait collection is a significant visual archive that includes depictions of Amir Timur, Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, Prince Parvez, and other Mughal royals (Beach, 2011). During Akbar's reign, portraiture began to reveal Rajput influences and flourished further under Jahangir. These two rulers not only employed local Indian painters but also welcomed artists from abroad, offering them positions and ranks (*mansabs*) in the court (Verma, 1994). Portraitists accompanied

emperors on their journeys to document significant individuals and events.

Among the most recognized portraitists of Jahangir's reign were Mansur, Abul Hasan, Bishandas, Bichitr, Govardhan, Payag, and Manohar. Jahangir, who was the most frequently painted Mughal emperor, particularly praised Bishandas, calling him unparalleled in the art of capturing likenesses (Smith, 1985). Bishandas was even sent to Persia to paint the Shah and his nobles. Jahangir was so impressed with the accuracy of the Shah's portrait that he gifted Bishandas an elephant in gratitude. A portrait of the Shah of Persia by Bishandas is currently preserved at the Indian Museum, Kolkata (Verma, 1994).

Portraiture also extended to public events and court assemblies, where even the least significant figures in the background were immortalized. These images not only documented imperial history but also revealed the social fabric and artistic excellence of the time (Beach, 2011).

PICTURES ON NATURAL HISTORY

The Mughal artist was fond of painting humans as well as animals and birds in their natural surroundings. They tried to make the miniature as natural as they could. Some paintings depict animals and birds against carefully composed landscapes to provide visual interest and narrative depth (Beach, 2011). Indian painters rarely created pure landscapes without human or animal figures; nearly every painting includes fauna such as deer, tigers, peacocks, and birds either as a central or background element (Goswamy, 2012). These background animals and birds, though small in scale, often go unnoticed, yet they play a key role in completing the composition. Landscapes typically include jungles, deserts, and remote habitats teeming with wild creatures and birds flying in the sky, providing evidence of how richly populated such areas were in the past (Verma, 1994). The distant birds placed in the sky often suggest peace and serenity, contributing symbolically to the mood of the scene (Losty, 1974).

At times, however, animals were added without reference to their natural habitats and were used

to complete a visual composition or fill space (Khandalavala & Chandra, 1969). Western influences, especially after increased contact with Europeans, also left their mark on landscape painting. The effects of European painting techniques are evident in the rendering of animals whose bodies are depicted with increasing shadow, recession, and realistic modeling—a clear result of Western visual perspective (Beach, 2011; Seyller, 2000).

Animals in landscapes are not always depicted alive. In hunting scenes, for example, one finds confused animals fleeing in panic, while others lie dead, showing the hunter's courage and skill (Verma, 1994). Other scenes depict animals calmly grazing or moving peacefully within their natural environment. Sometimes, the fauna is concealed within bushes and trees, less conspicuous and only noticeable upon close examination—showing the artist's mastery of subtle detail (Losty, 1974).

A famous anecdote recorded by Humayun's servant, Jauhar Aftabchi, tells of an occasion when a fine white bird caught the emperor's attention. He clipped its wings and ordered it painted by a court artist before letting it go—an example of the Mughal desire to document rare natural forms (Thackston, 2002). Mughal emperors took immense interest in nature. Akbar, though illiterate, was said to recall the names of hundreds of birds and animals (Smith, 1985). Jahangir maintained his own private deer park filled with nilgai, antelope, and exotic birds. Many Mughal animal studies were done in these controlled environments or the open fields (Verma, 1994).

Natural history painting became a major function of animal art. Artists were tasked with documenting exotic creatures brought to court from distant lands with scientific precision. Every physical detail—from the shape of bones and body structure to skin texture and facial expressions—was essential (Seyller, 2000). Jahangir, in particular, insisted on highly accurate representations of animals and birds, believing that getting their expressions right was harder than painting a human portrait (Beach, 2011). Each animal had unique body proportions, and achieving accuracy in those

forms posed a technical challenge for painters.

These detailed animal studies were of considerable value, perhaps even to early zoologists, due to their lifelike and precise renderings. Mughal artists had the skill to sketch quickly yet perfectly from life; these preliminary drawings were later transformed into richly finished miniatures. Albums of such fauna paintings, often commissioned by the emperors, were akin to miniature zoos—visual records of biodiversity admired for both their artistry and documentation (Losty, 1974; Goswamy, 2012)

MARGIN PAINTING

Border or margin painting was created to complement the beauty and elegance of the primary image in a miniature. This artistic practice has its roots in Persian border decoration, which originated in the twelfth century during the Sasanian reign and was later developed by the Mongols, Timurids, and Safavids. Their ornamental traditions had a direct influence on Mughal *hashiyah* painting (Seyller, 2000; Welch, 1976). In the final quarter of the sixteenth century, the Mughal atelier adopted this decorative practice. One of the earliest known examples of Mughal margin painting is found in the illustrated manuscript *Diwan-i-Hafiz* (c. 1588) from the Raza Library, Rampur (Losty, 1974).

This distinctive art form reached its zenith during the reign of Jahangir, when a miniature lacking a painted border was often considered unfinished or lacking in refinement (Verma, 1994). Margins in Mughal albums were frequently painted in gold and featured a wide range of decorative motifs, including fantastical and natural animals shown in hunting and fighting poses, colorful birds perched among foliage, and stylized vegetation (Beach, 2011). These richly adorned borders became a hallmark of all Mughal *muraqqa's* (albums), including celebrated works like *Red Blossoms* (Khandalavala & Chandra, 1969).

During Jahangir's rule, complex and aesthetically refined margins became highly prized, and renowned artists such as Basawan, Aqa Riza, Govardhan, Daulat, Balchand, and Bishandas were commissioned to design them

(Verma, 1994). Jahangir's celebrated Muraqqa' Gulshan, a masterpiece of the genre, is now housed primarily in the former Imperial Library in Tehran, while other volumes, including the *Berlin Album*, are kept at the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin. A third group of folios is held in a private collection in Tehran (Welch, 1976).

Over time, border painting became so prominent that it emerged as a separate artistic category, receiving independent attention from the imperial court. During Jahangir's reign, hashiyah painting attained exceptional artistic quality. The borders often displayed intricate gold leaf work, dynamic scenes of animal combat, imaginative rocky terrains, and finely observed flora. These margins were so exquisitely integrated that they could at times overshadow the central miniature they framed (Seyller, 2000).

This practice was also a collaborative artistic endeavor, with Ustad Mansur leading many projects. The overall visual richness was enhanced with double and sometimes triples borders—an inner border containing calligraphic specimens arranged in cartouches, and an outer border with finely painted floral compositions. On occasion, a third surrounding margin was altered or updated to match stylistic shifts or ceremonial needs (Beach, 2011). The increasing popularity of border painting also led to its categorization into sub-genres, such as naturalistic, calligraphic, symbolic, and decorative borders.

- I. **Naturalistic Plant Borders:** The borders were decorated with a variety of plants with blooming and construction flowers in different colors and sunglasses, tints and qualities, surrounding the main painting.
- II. **Flora Borders:** The border enclosed many floral varieties of blooming flowers rich the border space thickly with single color.
- III. **Landscape Borders:** This type of border tints, lion, deer and other animals, like dancing peacock, crane and other birds joined with a

landscape.

- IV. **Stylized Borders:** These borders contained of stylized creepers, blossoms and other floral ideas with rhythmic curves and twists.
- V. **Bird Borders:** Such borders extant landscape in light dim colors with significant variety of minute birds in deep bright colors.
- VI. **Fantastic Borders:** Here the borders inhabit more space than the central picture. Their appearance like a crowd of calligraphic specimen, inclining to reduce the picture to a secondary status, strange series.

CALLIGRAPHY

Calligraphy as a visual art has long been regarded as a transcendent aesthetic achievement, unrivaled by any other form of artistic expression, and is frequently referred to as "the noblest of the fine arts" (Qureshi, 1988). Its inclusion in Islamic architecture served a dual purpose: not only did it decorate sacred and royal buildings, but it also immortalized the time of construction and the identity of the patron (Blair, 2006). As a universally admired art among Muslims, calligraphy held both spiritual and artistic significance.

A Persian poet once stated, "O brother, a beautiful handwriting is friendly. It is like the soul inhabiting the bodies of both the young and the elderly" (Goswamy, 2012, p. 94). Abul Fazl, court historian of Akbar, considered writing a higher art than painting, revealing the prestige associated with calligraphy in the Mughal court (Verma, 1994). Though calligraphy originated in regions such as Asia Minor, Central Asia, and Iran, it flourished in India following the establishment of Muslim rule. Under the patronage of Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan in the 16th and 17th centuries, mural arts, calligraphy, and painting reached new heights, with calligraphy achieving supremacy and royal favor (Beach, 2011).

Calligraphy on Mughal monuments evolved continually. Buildings in Agra, Allahabad, and

Delhi are adorned with refined inscriptions in *Naskh*, *Thulth*, and *Nastaliq* scripts (Blair, 2006). These inscriptions often displayed the names of artists and calligraphers, highlighting their contributions to imperial aesthetics. Calligraphers at Akbar's court, such as Abdus Samad Shirin-Raqam, Mir Abdullah Tirmidhi, and Bayazid Dauri, advanced the art form, though none more so than Mohammad Husain Kashmiri, also known as Zarrin Qalam ("the golden pen"), who was regarded as the greatest *Nastaliq* writer of India (Seyller, 2000).

Mohammad Husain Kashmiri refined the fluidity of strokes and the elegance of curves, elevating calligraphy to a lyrical visual experience. The art of calligraphy, however, predates the Mughals in India. It was already visible in early Sultanate architecture, such as the Qutb Mosque (1191–98) and Qutb Minar (1206–36) in Delhi. Other notable examples include the mausoleums of Iltutmish (c. 1233) and Sultan Ghori (1231–32), where finely crafted inscriptions adorn domes and gateways (Qureshi, 1988; Blair, 2006).

Calligraphy also enriched manuscript art. *Muraqqa'at*—albums that compiled miniature paintings, poetry, and calligraphy—often featured the collaborative work of painters and calligraphers. For example, an image described as a joint creation shows a plant by Mansur Naqqash, a lit calligraphic panel by Mulla Mir Ali of Herat, and a floral border by another artist (Losty, 1974). Such collaborations reflect the high status of calligraphy and its integration with other art forms.

During Jahangir's reign, calligraphy blossomed further under artists like Mir Abdullah Tirmidhi, Abdur Rahim, Mohammad Shareef, and Sultan Sarhindi (Verma, 1994). Specimens of their work are preserved in leading manuscript collections across India, including those at the Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Library (Patna), the State Raza Library (Rampur), the Maulana Azad Library at Aligarh Muslim University, and the Arabic & Persian Research Institute in Tonk (Goswamy, 2012).

Distinct script types such as *Nastaliq*, *Shikasta*, *Gubar*, *Gulzar*, *Tughra*, *Bihar*, *Larza*, *Thulth*,

and *Hilali* evolved with unique styles and flourish, each reflecting the calligrapher's skill and the court's aesthetic preferences (Blair, 2006). These varieties reinforced the diversity and richness of the calligraphic tradition under the Mughals, particularly during its golden age under Jahangir and Shah Jahan.

CONCLUSION

Mughal paintings are a huge visual record of empire, wisdom, and creativity. This study reveals the complex role that art played in forming Mughal identity and worldview by examining important theme components, such as imperial portraiture, spiritual calligraphy, ornamental margins, and naturalistic studies. These paintings express a vision in which art becomes a celebration of artistic quality, a tool for learning, and a reflection of power—far beyond just being ornamental.

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