

Aesthetics of the Classical Period of the Islamic Mughal Empire in India through a Portrait of Abū al-Faṭḥ Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Akbar

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Abstract

The reign of Abū al-Faṭḥ Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Akbar (1556–1605) was a fruitful period of the political, cultural and spiritual synthesis of Persian, Indian, and European tradition, as well as an artistic and aesthetic renaissance. This cosmopolitan, universal and charismatic ruler strived for the external, political, material and spiritual well-being of his colourful empire. In search of a balance between the external and internal, and in his endeavours for the unification and uniformity of India he gradually created a completely new style of Mughal arts, which is a stunning reflection of his personality's transformations, principles, insights, interests, and spiritual growth.

The paper focuses on a psychological portrait of the ruler, who dictated aesthetics and the style of the classical period of Mughal arts which consists of the three basic developmental phases of Akbar's enigmatic character. The thesis on the parallel development of Akbar's personality and Mughal arts is supported by research on the influence of certain European and Persian aesthetic elements, and mainly on the influence of Indian philosophical-religious tradition (the doctrines on *rasa*, *bhakti*, *yoga*, and *tantra*). The early period of Mughal arts, with predominantly realistic elements, coincides with the ruler's dynamic, youthful enthusiasm and immense curiosity to acquaint himself the most varied aspects of external events and appearances. The second, the mature period, which enriches this earlier realism by means of mystical elements and the symbolism of Indian pre-Mughal painting, is marked by the shift into the interior and by searching for the harmony between the material and spiritual. In the late period of Mughal painting, however, reflexive and lyrical works prevail, which are a reflection of completion of Akbar's spiritual quests, and the unique project of multifaceted synthesis that he undertook and promoted.

Keywords: Mughal aesthetics, miniature painting, hybrid art, Akbar the Great

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Estetika klasičnega obdobja islamskega Mogulskega imperija v Indiji skozi portret Abūja al-Faṭḥa Jalāla al-Dīna Muḥammada Akbarja

Izvleček

Plodovito obdobje vladavine Abūja al-Faṭḥa Jalāla al-Dīna Muḥammada Akbarja (1566–1605) je bilo čas politične, kulturne in duhovne sinteze perzijske, indijske in evropske tradicije ter umetniške in estetske renesanse. Svetovljanski, vsestranski in karizmatični vladar si je namreč prizadeval za zunanje, politično in materialno, ter hkrati duhovno blagostanje svojega raznovrstnega imperija, v iskanju ravnovesja med zunanjim in notranjim ter v svojih prizadevanjih po združitvi in poenotenju Indije pa je postopoma ustvarjal povsem nov slog mogulske umetnosti, ki je osupljivi odraz njegovih osebnostnih preobrazb, nazorov, uvidov, interesov in duhovne rasti.

Članek se osredotoča na analizo psihološkega portreta vladarja, ki je narekoval estetiko in slog klasičnega obdobja mogulske umetnosti, ki sestoji iz treh temeljnih razvojnih faz Akbarjevega enigmatičnega značaja. Teza o paralelnem razvoju Akbarjeve osebnosti in mughalske umetnosti je podprta s preiskavo vpliva določenih evropskih in perzijskih estetskih elementov ter predvsem vpliva indijske filozofsko-religijske tradicije (doktrina o *rasah*, *bhakti*, *yoga*, *tantra*). Zgodnje obdobje mogulske umetnosti s pretežno realističnimi elementi sovпада z vladarjevim dinamičnim mladostniškim zanosom in neizmerno vedoželjnostjo po spoznanju najrazličnejših plasti zunanje pojavnosti. Drugo, zrelo obdobje, ki realizem obogati z mističnimi elementi in simboliko indijskega predmogulskega slikarstva, je zaznamovano z obratom v notranjost in iskanjem harmonije med materialnim in duhovnim, v poznem obdobju mogulskega slikarstva pa prevladujejo reflektivna in lirična dela, ki so odraz dovršitve Akbarjevih duhovnih iskanj in edinstvenega projekta večplastne sinteze.

Ključne besede: mogulska estetika, miniaturno slikarstvo, hibridna umetnost, Akbar Veliki

Introduction

Islam first arrived in India in the last part of the seventh century AD, but the sixteenth century was definitely a turning point regarding its influence in the region. This came with the establishment of the Mughal Empire (1526–1858), which embraced almost the entire area of present-day India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and was the beginning of one of the most stunning periods in Indian history. The Mughal Dynasty was not the first Islamic dynasty in India, but it is definitely considered one of the most important, mainly because of the rule of Abū al-Faṭḥ Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Akbar (r. 1556–1605),¹ one of the most influential rulers of the Mughal Empire and India as a whole. He was not only skilful on the political stage, but he also had a unique, exceptional, charismatic and cosmopolitan spirit,

1 Years denote the period of his rule.

and can be credited for a true renaissance of the arts in India, i.e. the emergence of a new synthetic style, known as Mughal painting. The new dynasty thus did not only influence various aspects of the socio-political reality of the land. But also contributed to hitherto unimagined dimensions in the development of arts and aesthetics. The intertwinement of many varied styles, which together formed a new artistic idiom, took place at the heart of Akbar's court, which fast became an innovative cultural and artistic focal point, with a library that also served as a gallery, a room for the debates, and a painting atelier.

It should be noted that what is termed Mughal painting is actually the fruit of Akbar's deeper spiritual aspiration, which, among other things, triggered an entire cultural and social revolution. As such, rather than examining the detailed historical events and offering a historical perspective on this, as documented in numerous studies of the Mughal Empire, the current study presents an examination of the development of Akbar's spiritual personal history, divided into three phases, which can help to explain the chronological puzzle of Mughal painting.

The paper works to support its thesis about the parallel development of Akbar's personality and Mughal painting, with the era's unique and unrepeatable cultural, social, religious, and political synthesis that saw the influences of India, Europe, Central Asia, Tibet, Nepal, and China merging together. After introducing Akbar's political, cultural, spiritual and artistic development, as well as the essential characteristics of Mughal painting which grew in the period of his rule, this paper approaches the central thesis by looking at the four elements of Indian spiritual tradition which influenced on the parallel development of Akbar's personality and Mughal painting: the theory of Indian aesthetics (*rasa*), *bhakti*, *yoga*, and *tantra*. On the basis of the influences of certain aspects of Indian cultural heritage, religion and philosophy and the records contained in Akbar's biography, the *Akbar-nāma*, which bears witness to the ruler's multi-layered personality and many interests, along with an analysis of some individual samples of Mughal painting, this paper divides the development of Mughal arts and Akbar's personal growth into the three essential periods that together form a complex picture of Mughal aesthetics.

Although there are several studies on the topic of Mughal art and aesthetics, it seems that none have so far addressed this particular issue in detail.

The Portrait of Akbar the Great and the Uniqueness of Hybrid Art of the Mughal Period

It is true that Humāyūn, also called Nāṣin al-Dīn Muḥammad (r. 1530–1556), the second ruler of the Mughal Empire, a son of the famous Bābur, known also

as *Zahīr al-Dīn Muḥammad* (r. 1526–1530), the founder of the Mughal dynasty, was not the man who initiated the Mughal arts. However, there is no doubt that he was an important in its birth². In addition to a profound interest in philosophy, poetry, music, and astrology, he was exceptionally enthusiastic about painting, and employed huge numbers of painters at his court. A few months after he had conquered Delhi in 1556, he fell down the stairs of his mighty library, very drunk, as well as addicted to opium, and died. His son Akbar (which means “the Great”) was born in 1542, and thus occupied his father’s throne not even fourteen years old, without any of the skills a ruler requires. However, his energy and intelligence enabled the Mughal Empire to quickly become the strongest kingdom in the entire history of India.³

To a great extent, this was, without a doubt, due to the fact that Akbar was not only a warrior and ambitious ruler, but also a philosopher and a mystic. He was born with such a temperament and he remained a mystic to the end (Smith 1917, 348, 349). At the start of his rule he set up temples all over India and financed the construction of mosques. His original orthodoxy was increasingly relaxed by his enthusiasm for the poetry of Persian Sufis, and later for Hinduism. In the context of Sufism, he was especially interested in Ibn al-‘Arabī and his introduction of the pantheistic One into Islamic monotheism, which is the essence of all things and thus the essence of all the religions. The latter was one of the key foundations for the later declaration of a new religious system. Akbar’s charismatic, dynamic and bold nature roamed over a diverse range of interests: from hunting and fighting to music, poetry, architecture, and painting. With regard to his immense love of art, the journey he undertook with his father from Kabul to India was a key turning point. There he was given lessons in painting, which later gave rise in his meaningful contribution to the establishment of the Mughal School of painting.

The peak of Akbar’s political power extends between the years 1569 and 1572. In this time, the construction of the capital Fatehpur Sikri (“the City of Victory”) also occurred. He moved there after the birth of his son Nūr-ud-dīn Muhammad Salīm, known by the name Jahāngīr, in 1569. In the process of expanding his imperial power, Akbar was always followed by a love of books and painting, which was inherited from his grandfather and father, and although, as numerous sources

2 Cary-Welch et al. state that Bābur “set the mood of Mughal painting” and Humāyūn “established its form” (Cary-Welch et al. 1987, 14), which was finally invented by his son Akbar. Akbar “made every possible use of the conditions that already existed, encouraging the traditional system of their subject in the most liberal manner” (Brown 1924, 19).

3 Cary-Welch et al. compare him with the Indian king Aśoka: “With the emperor Aśoka (r. app. 269–232) of the Maurya dynasty, Akbar ranks as one of India’s great philosopher-kings” (Cary-Welch et al. 1987, 15).

state, he never learnt to write and read (he was supposedly limited by dyslexia, according to Chakraverty (2005, 35)), he became one of the most universally educated rulers. Moreover, being illiterate was no real obstacle to this, as courtiers read to him daily. Abu'l-Fazl ibn Mubarak, Akbar's closest friend and biographer, wrote in his history of Akbar's life and rule, the *Akbar-nāma* (in the third part, titled the *Āin-i Akbarī*, to be more exact), which was written between the years 1589 and 1600: “/.../ among books of renown, there are few that are not read in His Majesty's assembly hall” (1873, 103). When listening to the reading aloud of books from his father's library,⁴ Akbar was said to remember every single word. Following the model of his father, he employed painters⁵ at his court and paid close attention to the production and illustration of manuscripts.⁶ Akbar's love of books was thus also a love of paintings.⁷ The latter decorated the walls of his palace, where he founded an atelier. Under the leadership of two skilled Persians, Mīr Sayyid 'Alī and 'Abd-uṣ-Ṣamad, who arrived in India from Iran in 1555, dozens of mostly Hindu painters were trained. In addition, in 1575 Akbar devoted a part of his new residence to a room called Ibādat Khāna (“House of Worship”), for socializing and philosophical debates, where he invited people with the most different beliefs and religions. This room, a spiritual junction for the meeting and synthesis of different cultures, became a source of surprising novelties in the fields of religion and painting. In this cosmopolitan atmosphere, people with very different skills from all corners of the world rallied, not only from India and Central Asia, but also from Europe and Africa—in addition to soldiers, bureaucrats, officials, noted politicians, merchants, and travellers, there were also poets, philosophers, painters, musicians, merchants, and fortune tellers in great numbers.

At the peak of the golden age of the court atelier and the debate room, in 1582, Akbar declared a new religious system Dīn-i Ilāhī (“the Divine Faith”),⁸ which emerged on the basis of profound and piercing debates among Hindus, Jains, Muslims, Christians, and Zoroastrians, which usually lasted long into the night. This created a controversy in orthodox Islamic circles, and attracted significant

4 Akbar continued adding to his father's library, and by his death it included around 24,000 volumes of Persian, Arab, Hindi, Sanskrit, Kashmiri, Greek and Latin texts, which embraced, in addition to *belles-lettres*, the works from the fields of religion, philosophy, anthropology, history, mathematics and astrology.

5 In ten years of Akbar's rule, there were supposed to be thirty painters and seventy assistants from Persia, Central Asia and mostly from India employed in the atelier.

6 His father Humāyūn became enthusiastic about illustrating manuscripts at the court in Tabriz in Persia.

7 Court painters also illustrated those books which were a part of the personal library of Akbar's mother, Ḥamīda Banū Begum.

8 This religion, the heart of Akbar's cosmopolitan plan, was never actually adopted by the masses.

criticism and disapproval. There is no doubt that the wealthy men in Akbar's court were more enthusiastic about his passionate zeal as a youthful warrior, although this did not last for a very long time. One event driven by this, which was at the same time a cause for Akbar's first significant personal change and the entire nature of his rule, was the killing of Hemu, the Hindu general of Surs in 1556. Under the leadership of the military commander of the Mughal army Bairam Khan, Akbar's soldiers, in the presence of the ruler himself, pushed an arrow into Hemu's eye, which penetrated to the other side of the general's skull, moving through the brain tissue. This incident was essential of Akbar's personal transformation, which started with a growing resistance to Khan's methods, and the fading of his youthful admiration of the commander's fearlessness. Dislike of Khan, which increased in Akbar after this cruel killing, caused him to send the commander on a pilgrimage to Mecca. However, Khan never returned from this trip, as he was killed by Afghans on the way. Another key event in Akbar's personal development occurred in 1562, when he was overtaken by a mystic experience while riding a horse, which stumbled and fell badly. Akbar understood this as a message from God, and thus his unique method of imperial conduct and attitude towards those with different beliefs, mostly regarding religion, were set.⁹

Akbar's change in attitude towards non-Muslims was also impacted by his interest in the various aspects of Hinduism, which is evident from his translating and illustrating the basic Hindu texts between the years 1580 and 1600, such as the *Harivaṃśa*, the *Yoga-Vāsiṣṭha*, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. His purpose was to enlighten the Muslims in his court and entire empire, and thus establish a bridge over the abyss which divided Muslims and Hindus. Without any doubt, Akbar's use of translations here was a reflection of his multi-layered nature and sincere interest in the Indian cultural and spiritual legacy, which already existed before his personal transformation. At the same time, these translations also served as tools for strengthening political power and preserving stability. Before Mughal rule was established, India was fragmented and economically unstable. There were also problems due to disagreements between Muslims and Hindus, with this relationship being, as Akbar realized, the most festering wound of his empire. As such, as one of the conditions for the power and stability of the state, as well as social harmony, Akbar recognized the need to

9 After this event, Akbar adopted a number of measures which, however, did not reduce the power of his empire, but instead strengthened it to previously unimagined degrees. "He prohibited the enslavement of Hindu prisoners of war, allowed Hindus to occupy important governmental posts, and abolished a tax on pilgrims and a poll tax on non-Muslims." (Cary-Welch 1978, 17, 18) He also married a Hindu princess, the daughter of the ruler of Amber Raja Bihārī Mal, in 1562. One of his wives, Mariam-uz-Zamani, even followed Christian traditions.

establish a sense of symbiosis between Muslims and Hindus. Hindus therefore became his irreplaceable counsellors and soldiers. He did not choose the people who formed his closest circle according to their religion or ethnicity, but according to their skills and knowledge.

In addition to serving as Akbar's spiritual laboratory, which enriched the spirit of the young man, Fatehpur Sikri was also the focus of the ruler's imperialistic plan, whose main goal was the union of the empire. The cultural and spiritual atmosphere behind the walls of the emperor's palace thus influenced his actions on the stage of the contemporary social and political reality. The process of establishing the strength of the empire, and, at the same time, consolidation and strengthening his authority, were conducted in an entirely unique way—through innovations on the basis of religion and painting, which became the most important part of his political program.

Art was thus a multi-layered reflection of Akbar's principles, by which he established a special dialogical discourse. He kept his distance from dogmatic Islam, and instead of proclaiming the superiority of such rules he emphasized the equality of all religions and beliefs. On top of a synthetic religious system that drew elements from various religions, Akbar crowned himself as the supreme authority, sovereign and Earthly representative of God. This latter role was in accordance with the conception of the royal function in both Hinduism and Islam—a king is the representative of God on Earth, and is responsible for the spiritual and material welfare of the people. This double position of the ruler was also adopted by Akbar. In the *Akbar-nāma* he is described as the ruler of the world, the “depicter of the external, revealer of the internal” (Minissale 2009, 223)—he ruled the outside world, the Mughal Empire, and at the same time was responsible for the multitude of internal spiritual worlds, which lived within the conquered border on the face of the Earth. This is also in accordance with Akbar's complex and unique nature—he was not only interested in conquering external areas, he was also a spiritual master. This is exactly why he realised the necessity of establishing a balance between both sides, as he stood in a position where he became responsible for each of them, and as a king he had the power to put in force his cosmopolitan beliefs. Moreover, in this process he silenced all the complaints at his court by means of his spiritual greatness, and without any use of force.

Without a doubt, Akbar is a paradigmatic example of a true divine ruler who was able to overcome the naked, imperialistic tensions over the whole spread of his territory. The fact that art represented the centre of Akbar's personal and political life is proven in a quote from *Āīn-I Akbarī*, often cited in the literature:

There are many that hate painting; but such men I dislike. It appears to me as if a painter had quite peculiar means of recognizing God; for a painter in sketching anything that has life, and in devising its limbs, one after the other, must come to feel that he cannot bestow individuality upon his work, and is thus forced to think of God, the Giver of life, and will thus increase in knowledge. (Abu'l-Fazl 1873, 108)

However, Akbar did not become the ruler of the spiritual world by proclaiming one truth only, but instead by way of a peculiar synthesis which was also reflected in an entirely new language of arts. This universal project of synthesis led to the development of Mughal painting. Akbar is thus an example of a ruler who determined the prevailing artistic style or, to be more exact, his personal growth laid down the paths for the new art. At the same time, the latter influenced the development and transformation of Akbar's personality, where is possible to speak of a tight connection, and, at the same time, mutual conditionality between the two.

The painting of the Mughal period is an exceptional example of a hybrid but original, elaborated and perfected in style, which is a mix of of Persian (and thus indirectly also Chinese¹⁰), Hindu, Jain and European elements. It is a peculiar synthesis of the cultural heritage of Hinduism and Islam, which is the fruit of Akbar's restless efforts in order to establish a spirit of tolerance. At the same time, the curiosity of the ruler's universal spirit opened the gates of India with regard to European aesthetics. Gonzalez stated that the true ontology of Mughal painting "was born of a subtly modulated transitive relationship between three distinct aesthetic metaphysics, that of Persian, Indo-Sultanate, and European pictorialities" (2015, 283). The Mughal style of painting is not distinguished just because of its innovative aesthetic dimensions, but also because of a cluster of values, beliefs, ideals, and ideas of various traditions, which were deftly woven into the linear style of Persian painting, reflecting a new understanding of the world and the place of humans within it.

Mughal art was also a way of enforcing Akbar's political power, establishing social harmony and forming a religious synthesis. It was manifested through the ruler's strongest weapon, books. Through all history, Muslims are termed as "the people of the book", and in the period of Akbar's rule books occupied the throne

10 The Chinese influences on India were mainly second-hand, through Persian arts, and the interaction between the two different artistic traditions is, as Coomaraswamy states, "sometimes quite charming" (1910, 880). The connection between both originated with works of pottery in the ninth century. Mughal rulers were collectors of Chinese porcelain, decorated with distinctively Persian features. Moreover, Persians were also delighted at certain Chinese features (above all the mythological entities, clouds and rich and perfected plant patterns).

above all the other ways of establishing wealth and enforcing the power. But along with books, such high status was also assigned to the art of painting. Many of the paintings from Akbar's period were thus created as illustrations of manuscripts (historical books, religious and philosophical texts, *belles-lettres*, and so on) and their translations. Numerous independent compositions were also preserved. Mughal paintings presented a huge album of the world and the diverse grandness of its multi-layered reality, intersecting with a premonition of the inevitable laws of life and death, as well as the search for immortality, and this can be seen in the works known as miniatures. The term "miniature" derives from the Latin "minimum", which means "red lead", and was used to emphasize the initial letters in a manuscript.

In spite of a mistaken etymology since the seventeenth century, the word miniature was connected with "minute" and was also used to describe small portraits /.../. In the Indian context, "miniature" generally refers to a painting or illumination, small in size, meticulous in detail. (Chakraverty 2005, 8)

In the context of Mughal painting, the term denotes illuminations and masterpieces in larger formats, among which there were also wall paintings. Miniature painting, "a colorful phase in Indian cultural history" (*ibid.*, 33), became much more common in the East and West between the ninth and the eleventh centuries, used as a part of manuscripts that were written on palm leaves,¹¹ i.e. in the Buddhist and Jain tradition. Other illustrations of holy scriptures in India date back to some centuries before Christ.

The Development of the Mughal Artistic Style through the Spiritual Evolution of Akbar the Great

In order to systematize the examination of the parallel development of Mughal painting and Akbar's personality, the latter is divided into three phases. To further clarify these three periods, this paper approaches the outlined psychological and artistic development by illuminating the influence of four streams from Indian spiritual heritage which are tightly intertwined, and which co-formed the Mughal aesthetics in this period: the doctrine of Indian aesthetics (*rasa* theory), *bhakti*, *yoga*, and *tantra*.

11 In the fourteenth century palm leaves were gradually replaced by paper.

The Influence of Indian Traditions on the Development of the Mughal Arts: *Rasa*, *Bhakti*, *Yoga*, and *Tantra*

As has already been indicated, Akbar highly appreciated all forms of Indian arts. At the same time, Mughal patrons and artists, e.g. Abu'l Fazl, Mirza Khan, and Saif Khan Faqirullah, were very familiar with various treatises on the Indian arts, which they were also translating into Persian. The Mughals also knew the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (*The Drama Manual*),¹² the earliest surviving treatise on the origins, nature, and performance of the dramatic arts (music, dance, and theatre), ascribed to the sage Bharata. The text offers essential elements of the doctrine of Indian aesthetics, which is based on the *rasa* concept. *Rasa* (flavour, taste, aesthetic experience, joy) was defined as a distinctive feature of dramatic experience, aesthetic enjoyment in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which could be evoked in actors and the audience itself. The *rasa* theory was based on the analysis of feelings and various aesthetic experiences. It was further developed by Abhinavagupta (c. 975–1025), one of the most important representatives of Kashmiri Śaivism, who focused his attention on the close relationship between *tantric* ritual and aesthetic experience. *Rasa* as an expression of the condition of an individual (experience and mood) was defined also as the soul of every art. He added the ninth, *śānta rasa*, which represents the supreme peace of mind, to Bharata's list of eight *rasas*.¹³ The aesthetic experience, *śānta rasa*, is analogous to the mystic experience (*brahmāsvāda*), where the aim is to achieve a state of selflessness, transcending the ego, and thus one of union, which leads to the experience of blissfulness. What is essential here is the fact that the theory of *rasa* was certainly known at the Mughal court by the late sixteenth century (Butler Schofield 2015, 410). In particular, it became involved in all the aspects of the various artistic forms at the court during Akbar's rule. The doctrine on *rasas* thus influenced all the types of art at the Mughal court. In Mughal paintings, all the types of *rasas* are manifested: in the early period, it was mostly *śṛṅgāra rasa* (sensual pleasures), in the mature period its second dimension (spiritual love), and in the late period the *śānta rasa* took precedence. Butler Schofield notes that all the *rasas* were also present in Sufism:

All nine *rasas* are explored, savored, tasted, and transformed for the purposes of teaching the Sufi how to control and sublimate his baser emotions—a notion that has clear links with Islamic understanding of

12 It achieved its final form in the fourth century AD. However, there were already some parts in the second century BC.

13 There are eight emotions (love, laughter, sorrow, energy, anger, fear, disgust and amazement), which engender eight corresponding *rasas*: *śṛṅgāra* (erotic), *bāsyā* (comic), *karuṇā* (pathetic), *vīra* (heroic), *raudra* (furious), *bhāyānaka* (fearful), *bibhatsa* (grotesque), *adbhuta* (wondrous).

cultivating the emotions through artistic means in order to balance mental and physical health. (Butler Schofield 2015, 412, 413)

The Indian doctrine on *rasas* was reformed by Rūpa Gosvāmī in accordance with his Vaiṣṇava orientation, and he introduced a systemized demonstration of Vaiṣṇava aesthetics in his work the *Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu* (usually translated as *The Ocean of the Essence of Devotional Rasa*), and defined *rasa* in a religious sense. As the supreme *rasa* he chose *bhakti rasa* (devotional *rasa*), which constitutes the highest religious experience based on the focus on God Kṛṣṇa as the Supreme Reality, which is the One beyond all diversities.

The new devotional aesthetics¹⁴ thus influenced the mature period of Mughal aesthetics. Here, it is necessary to stress what on many occasions is overlooked, although exceptionally important, the fact that Akbar himself influenced the rise of the devotional *bhakti* movement. Burchett describes the Mughal empire as a “religiopolitical idiom in which Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* institutional forms became key symbols of power and deportment, and thus *bhakti* communities became beneficiaries of extensive patronage” (2012, 3). The rise of *bhakti* was thus inseparable from Mughal socio-political developments, and Akbar was precisely the man who contributed most to the rise of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* because of his cosmopolitan codes and symbols of virtue, deportment, and aesthetic sophistication (ibid., 35).¹⁵ As such, the even tighter connection between the religious and aesthetic was formed, an aesthetic and religious experience. Both were based on acquiring a sense of union, the precondition of which was exceeding the individual, distancing oneself from the ego, and this was especially marked in the late period of Akbar’s aesthetics.

In addition, the Mughal rulers were quite familiar with the characteristics of *yoga*, and “it is striking that the Mughals, in particular, became patrons of *yogi* establishments” (Ernst 2005, 24). As has already been indicated, Sufism also influenced Akbar in important ways. In the classical doctrines of the latter, the elements of *yoga* and *tantra* were interlaced in the period of Akbar’s rule. Sufi texts of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries articulate the practice and conception of *yoga*, which shows “Islamic domestication of *yoga*, which makes it integral to Sufi discipline” (Hatley 2007, 361). In addition, the texts of the sixteenth century

14 There are also some fascinating parallels between the *bhakti*, devotion with royal ceremonials, loyalty, and service that Mughal officials gave to the emperor and that offered by Vaiṣṇava *bhaktas* to God (Burchett 2012, 40).

15 The fact that Swami Haridāsa, a known Vaiṣṇava poet, is said to have been the teacher of Tansen, the accomplished musician of Akbar’s court, shows that various Vaiṣṇava movements were rather close to Akbar.



Fig. 1: “Krishna Holds Up Mount Govardhan to Shelter the Villagers of Braj” (folio from an illustrated manuscript *the Hariṅvaṁśa*), ca. 1590–95. Medium: ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. (Source: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)



Fig. 2: “Misbah the Grocer Brings the Spy Parran to his House” (folio from an illustrated manuscript *the Hamza-nāma*), ca. 1570; attributed to Daswant’b, Mithra. Medium: ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on cloth; mounted on paper. (Source: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)

also reflect a Nātha *yogi* orientation (Vaiṣṇava-oriented Sufi texts occur in the seventeenth century; *ibid.*, 362). *Tantric yoga* thus became an integral component of Sufi practice in that period.¹⁶ Eaton makes an interesting point that Muslims perceived northern Bengal as a fabulous and mysterious place, inhabited by expert practitioners of the occult, *yoga*, and magic (1993, 77). These very mystic elements of *tantric* tradition are noticeable in the mature period of the Mughal aesthetic. In addition—the same as in the case of the upper levels of aesthetic experience in the doctrine of *rasas*—the practices of *yoga* and *tantra* are interlaced in Sufi doctrines, aimed at achieving egoless absorption, union and pure awareness of the presence of God, which became the aim of artistic (and personal) expression in the latter period of Mughal painting.

According to these statements, it is possible to confirm the mutual influences of the Hindu and Islamic spiritual worlds. Not only that Akbar accepted certain flows of Indian tradition due to his open and curious spirit, but also that he contributed to their independent existence and further development, which is another dimension of his cosmopolitanism. To sum up, the intertwinement of various aesthetic experiences, *rasa*, *bhakta* devotional religion, *yoga* and *tantric* magic and mysticism, is manifested in the transformations of Akbar's personality and development of Mughal aesthetics. The depiction of varied emotions and worldly pleasures is characteristic of the early period of Mughal arts. Therefore, aesthetic experience in this context derives mostly from visual delight, while the elements of spiritual pleasures, an aspiration for mental satisfaction, and aesthetic experience, which is aimed at overcoming the profane, start to emerge in the mature period to a greater extent, which culminates in the late period of Mughal arts in Akbar's reign.

Pluralism of Superabundance of the Appearance: Subtle Naturalism of the Early Period of Mughal Painting (1556–1579)

Already as a child, Akbar was eager for knowledge. Born in India he was thrilled over the immense diversity of the land, the variety of the world stretched between life, death, and immortality. This youthful amazement, where Akbar's interest in the physical world derived from, he nourished for all of his life. This is reflected especially in the early period of Mughal painting (1556–1579), with its peak in the time of establishing the court's atelier in Fatehpur Sikri in 1569, where mostly Hindu

16 Here, it is worth mentioning that, with the curious exception of the patronage given by several of the Mughal emperors, including both Akbar and Aurangzeb, none of the Muslim rulers of India is known to have been a supporter of *tantric* religious cults (Lorenzen 2002, 26).



Fig. 3: “Assad Ibn Kariba Launches a Night Attack on the Camp of Malik Iraj” (folio from an illustrated manuscript the *Hamza-nāma*), ca. 1564–69; attributed to Basāwan, Shraavan. Medium: ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on cloth; mounted on paper. (Source: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)



Fig. 4: “The Spy Zambur Brings Mahiya to the City of Tawariq” (folio from an illustrated manuscript the *Hamza-nāma*), ca. 1570; attributed to Kesav Das, Mah Muhammad. Medium: ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on cloth; mounted on paper. (Source: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)

painters worked. Akbar especially appreciated these, for he believed that “their pictures surpass our conception of things. Few, indeed, in the whole world are found equal to them” (Abu’l-Fazl 1873, 107).¹⁷ The first phase of the development of the Mughal painting is denoted as the golden age of Akbar’s school of painting:

Nothing like Fatehpur Sikri ever was created before or can be created again. It is ‘a romance in stone’—the petrification of a passing mood in Akbar’s strange nature begun and finished in lightning speed with that mood lasted—inconceivable and impossible at any other time or in any other circumstance. (Smith 1917, 445)

In his youthful and passionate zeal, Akbar was interested in all the layers of the world and life—everyday human matters, especially luxurious happenings at the court in all of its might, actual and historical events, dramatic demonstrations of tumultuous occurrences on the battlefields and in conquest, as well as other acts heroism. Common depictions from this period, such as courtly parties, lovers on the terrace and garden, and so on, reflect the manifestation of *śṛṅgāra rasa* (erotic love, romantic love, and passion) in the arts. It is *rasa*, which is the source of different forms of sensual pleasure. At the same time, its other dimension emerges (although not to such extent as in the mature and the late period), i.e. *śṛṅgāra rasa* as spiritual love, which goes beyond all that is profane.

Early Moghul art includes some portraits of rulers, important persons at court, Islamic aristocrats, soldiers and other people who inspired the ruler, among which there were also European merchants and travellers who were especially interesting to Akbar. He was enthusiastic about the richness of the plant and animal world, as well as about varied happenings in it—and this distinguishes Mughal painting from the Persian and Hindu traditions. The earliest paintings in Hindu manuscripts reflect the Hindu view of the world and mostly depict different layers of the transcendent cosmic order, with a lot of mythological and symbolic materials, while in early Mughal painting the a conception of man and history is more characteristic, which brought an entirely new vision of life—the idea of the importance and preciousness of particular aspects of everyday life, entirely ordinary events whose value is the same as that of events with incomprehensible cosmic ages and in the divine spheres.

It is from this orientation of Akbar’s interests that the style of early Mughal painting itself, which includes realistic and naturalistic elements, derives. Historical

¹⁷ According to the words of Abu’l-Fazl, Akbar met his painters at least once a week. Then they debated, exchanged views, experiences, and agreed on the themes that would decorate manuscripts and canvases.

events, happenings at court, and the animal and plant worlds are showed as clearly, factually and directly as possible. In the latter period of Mughal painting, the influence of the West, which was accepted by Akbar with great enthusiasm, is present. When he became a ruler, Akbar's youthful enthusiasm developed into sensitive compassion for the needs of different groups. His religious tolerance also derives from the perspective of the king and his sympathy, respect, and fascination with India itself. Sources state that Akbar walked all over India and talked to people, wishing to learn as much as possible about their cultures, habits, principles, and beliefs, and then he learned of numerous problems which troubled the population, such as the friction between Muslims and Hindus. He is also said to have participated in numerous Hindu religious festivals, by which he deepened his cosmopolitan views and understanding of the differences in his lands. However, he did not only stand up for the union of Islam and Hinduism, but also for that of all the other religions, which he pursued even more intensively after meeting Jesuits. In the early period of Akbar's rule, the Portuguese established their trading posts in India, and the king met with a delegation of Jesuit Fathers from the Portuguese colony of Goa in the Fatehpur Sikri¹⁸ in 1578. The Portuguese gave Akbar an illustrated Bible, by which they spread Christianity in India,¹⁹ which enthralled the ruler so much that he ordered his court painters to also include the realistic style in the images into their creations. He also ordered Abu'l-Fazl to translate the Bible into Persian, the official language of the Mughal Empire. At this time, Christian motifs and substantive elements were introduced into Mughal iconography. Bailey calls this the "Mughal 'conquest' of the Catholic art" (1998, 24).²⁰

Abu'l-Fazl describes Akbar's fascination with the greatness of Western painting as based on the "magic making of the Europeans. The delicacy of work, clarity of line and boldness of execution, as well as other fine qualities, have reached perfection, and inanimate objects appear to have come alive" (Cleveland Beach 2002, 55). Thus Akbar's Mughal artistic style is a synthesis of Persian elements, Indian painting and "European illusionistic techniques, such as modeling of forms" (Canby 2005, 40), which is how elaborate and naturalistic images of human life were created. The influences of the European style are also evident in the increase of the use of shadow, the employment of scientific linear and aerial perspectives, in

18 Akbar is said to have met two Jesuits in Bengal in 1576. He discussed religion with them, one of his favorite topics.

19 Illustrations of important events helped Jesuits to promote the Christian faith.

20 One example of a distinctively Christian feature in Mughal art is a picture in the manuscript *Khamasa-e-Khusrow*, made for Akbar in 1595 and titled "Alexander Lowered into the Sea". It shows an apocryphal event from the life of Alexander the Great, with the man a large glass bell and submerged into the sea. Another famous work of art with Christian features is "The Birth of the Virgin" from 1581.

a different treatment of the landscape, a special form of backgrounding (*dūr-nāma*, distant scene), and in the production of large oil paintings on canvas (Brown 1924, 177, 178).

However, in all these paintings, which present a small, illustrated history of various aspects of the physical world, it is possible to notice a combination of the spiritual and material, as also seen miniatures, which bring together “the world of flesh and spirit” (Cary-Welch 1978, 75). Akbar was in fact interested in mysticism in all religions, which was due to the influence of Sufism, which absorbed some of the important elements of the *tantric* tradition and *yoga*, whose goal was to achieve a supreme spiritual state and union. If the luxury of the court, perfected to the smallest detail, can be seen over most of a painting’s surface, in the background there are windows of the palace, unnoticeable at first glance, through which a view of the garden, enlightened by a mysterious and supernatural light, can be seen.²¹ Spiritual and mystical connections with the physical can also be found in the depiction of dervishes, in which small details, such as facial expressions, direct the beholder to that which is otherwise inconceivable and exceeds human understanding.

The subtle realism of Mughal works of art, with their energetic and rhythmic structure, intertwined with the otherwise bounded dimensions of the spiritual world, is distinctively dynamic, and this is where the difference in style compared to Persian painting occurs—the Mughal style is less manneristic and static; it is much more dramatic, which is of course in line with Akbar’s adventurous spirit which dictated the early painting style. There, in addition to the impact of the ruler’s spirit on the emergence of this style of painting, the influence of Indian art is also evident, i.e. in the depiction of a large room where something is happening, and uplift and dynamism of the event. However, it needs to be added that Akbar’s painters pursued the latter to unimagined dimensions. This is best illustrated by the most stunning creation of the Mughal creative laboratory, a series of giant pictures on cotton, a vast work *Dāstān-e Amīr Ḥamza* (the *Ḥamza-nāma*, *The Story of Prince Ḥamza*), which depicts the adventures of Amīr Ḥamza. The pictures in the *Ḥamza-nāma*, contributed by hundreds of painters,²² represent the key conceptual and aesthetic notions of early Persian court painting. Every picture focuses on a single dramatic event, an episode, and all are full of a feeling for the depth of the space, its tangibility and actual presence. Dynamic gestures and facial expressions are also seen. In the background of this there are the origins of a psychological

21 An outstanding example is the painting from the period of Jahāngīr, “Prince Khurram (later Shah Jahān) Weighted against Metals”.

22 The illustration of the manuscript was finished in the period 1572/1573.



Fig. 5: “Alexander Visits the Sage Plato in his Mountain Cave” (folio from an illustrated manuscript the *Khamsa-e-Khusraw*); 1597–98; attributed to Basāwan. Medium: main support: ink, opaque watercolor, gold on paper; margins: gold on dyed paper. (Source: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)



Fig. 6: “Hamza’s Heroes Fight in Support of Qasim and Badi’uzzaman” (folio from an illustrated manuscript the *Hamza-nāma*); ca. 1564–69, attributed to Shraṭvan, Daswānt’b, Tara. Medium: ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on cloth; mounted on paper. (Source: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)

motivation, which is especially distinctive in the late period of Mughal painting. In addition to actual events, a real psychological drama, invisible on the first glance, is also taking place in the paintings.

Otherwise, the events behind the walls of the palace are also marked by some vulgar hedonism, which is based mostly on drinking alcohol and other intoxicating substances, and the consequences of doing so, which stirred the painters' imaginations.²³ This extensive work, which contains around 1,400 pictures, was created in a predominantly Persian style of painting. It was started by Mīr Sayyid Ali, the painter and poet with a "mystic strain of Sufi inspiration" (Chakraverty 2005, 41), who was assisted by more than 50 painters. The images are thus a reflection of the aesthetics of Mīr Sayyid Ali, which are based on the idea that this world is a mirror of the divine One, although expressed according to the norms of Akbar's atelier (*ibid.*). At the same time, the full series of these paintings is a marvellous visual equivalent of Akbar's youthful spirit and energy in the period when he started to rule, bursting with vitality and curiosity. What can be noticed, however, as that which separates Mughal painting from the earliest paintings of Hindu and Jain manuscripts—in addition to the much greater diversity of events—is the intensity of the dynamics. Everything in the paintings bubbles with movement, even the trees and rocks. The most varied forces of nature, which act in a turbulent occurrence of the human world, are thus depicted in a peculiar way. This sense of dynamics is deepened by the dramatic moves and facial expressions of the people, and, at the same time, by the depth of space, where the influence of European art is evident. A single major event is usually presented in each painting, and this is accompanied by many marginal and varied actions, including in the world of animals (which are shown independently, too), hidden in the shadows of the rocks and treetops. These stunning, yet at first glance unnoticeable, images are characteristic of early Mughal painting, which was much less common at the end of the sixteenth century, and almost disappeared during the last years of Akbar's rule. Therefore in Mughal Islamic miniatures, bordered by framed sides, a seemingly limitless space is filled with luxurious appearances, infinite motion, diverse events, and many small details, among which none is less significant, making an exuberant whole. In the multi-layered visual experience such works offer, spilled over the entire canvas, the ambition of the painters for the total reduction of empty space is evident, which derives from Akbar's yearning to capture the world with all of his might, "his likenesses /.../ of all the grandness of the realm" (Abu'l-Fazl 1873, 108, 109). At the same time, the latter most likely derives from the nomadic fear of empty

23 An excellent example of turbulent happenings behind the walls of the palace is the painting "Hamza's Spies Attack the City of Kaymar" (app. 1570).

space (lat. *horror vacui*). This characteristic aspiration to fill space, the absence of emptiness, is also shown in the lack of depicting the sky, which causes fear of emptiness and incomprehensible limitlessness. If the sky was shown, then it was rarely empty, but always filled with colours, lightning, light, dawn, smoke, fog, clouds, or full of stars. In its deep and mostly filled blueness, the sky created the atmosphere of fairy tales. A mass of these small details stirs a sense of virtuosity, wonderment, and imagination, which—in spite of the realistic or naturalistic style used—carefully preserves the field of free interpretation to capture what is unthought and unsaid, which thus, remains, and must always remain, undepicted.

The dynamics of contents and completeness of the compositions were co-created by the palette of colours used, which include many vivid and subtle shades and which conjure a special atmosphere in the otherwise reduced landscape (with the aim of focusing attention on them main event), with the images filled with mountains or the edges of cities in the background. The latter points to another characteristic of the early Mughal painting, which was entirely different to Indian painting. With Mughal art space did not stir any feeling of depth, but was more a case of the dynamics of the surface, an exhibition of the harmony of the universe.

The elements of realism and naturalism are also reflected in the rich creations of plants and animals. The numerousness of such distinctive features indicates Akbar's interest in the richness and variety of Indian flora and fauna, which his grandfather Bābur had also been enthusiastic about. These flora and fauna differed a lot from those in Central Asia, and Akbar's son Jahāngīr became especially fascinated with this topic. Depicting elephants and tigers became common,²⁴ as well as birds in pairs (in the latter, the medieval Islamic practice of painting animals in pairs is reflected), animals fighting and the law of the stronger were also common themes (here the influence of Sufism with regard to the transience of the physical world is present, as wells the constant change which marks this world; these concrete fights are transferred to the symbolic level in the second period of Mughal art). In spite of the various realistic sets of Mughal paintings, it is possible to find numerous mythological animals also in them, such as dragons, which were a very common motif.²⁵

24 Elephants and tigers are a common motif in Indian painting.

25 The distinctive features of dragons came to Mughal art through Persia, which accepted various mythological entities from the Chinese, as seen in paintings on textiles and ceramics in the period of the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) and the early period of the Ming (1368–1644), when contacts between the Persians and Chinese were very intense (Tittley 1981, 3). Mughal painters accepted the Chinese image of the dragon which was combined by Indian *makara*, a half terrestrial and half marine entity. It was created in the Persian manner.



Fig. 7: “Umar defeats a dragon”(folio from an illustrated manuscript *the Hamza-nāma*), 1577, attributed to Daswant’*h*, Tara. (Source: *Europeana Collections*)

In the later period, animals were often placed in a supernatural landscape, where they showed that which was invisible in the physical world and could only be sensed by a vigilant spirit. In addition to the at first naturalistic and later increasingly more symbolic paintings of animals, the distinctive features of plants were popular—trees, flowers, bushes, individual stems with flowers, and tendrils in arabesques, which emerge not only as illustrations in manuscripts but also in decorative artistic pieces, textiles and architectural buildings (the depiction of plants in and on mosques is a direct reference to paradise). In addition, pictures of plants decorated the edges of the miniatures. In Mughal painting, the richness of the plants is accompanied by Indian flora, among which the lotus flower was especially popular. Mughal artists were also enthusiastic about the plains of wild tulips in Kashmir. A cypress, intertwined with a flower, was often depicted, representing a metaphor for youth. The king and his court painters, behind the marvellous appearance of flowers and other plants, anticipated that which emerged in those works produced in the second and later periods under Akbar—the insight into the immediateness of beauty and the process of its inevitable passing.

Assimilating the Depth: Aesthetics of Ambivalence and Harmony of the Mature Period of the Mughal Painting (1580–1595)

Akbar's spiritual and intellectual interests were confronted by a "dramatic change" (Kossak 1997, 10) after 1580, and mostly after 1585, when he moved to the capital in Lahore in today's Pakistan. At this time he transformed the structure of the work that took place in the atelier—instead of working as a group, the painters in new capital worked individually. These artists painted the walls of the new palace, among other projects.

After 1585, Akbar's style is still aimed at the earthly realm. However, it becomes more intuitive, filled with emotions, more mature insights and empathy for all living things. The latter is evident in the images of nature and various events, produced on the basis of attentive observation. This is how Akbar searched for deeper answers to the important questions that interested him. Realism, along with the ruler's youthful enthusiasm for heroism and the luxury of the temporal world, is now accompanied by an aspiration for a subtler spiritual quest and fulfilment. Some pictures are thus much more intimate, peaceful, marked with more limited colours and less dramatic overall. However, most of the paintings still show turbulent events, but based on entirely different backgrounds, representing a shift from the rather dreamlike heroic idealism of the first period, and announcing the mature Mughal style.

The structure of the focal events is even more intensive, similar to the first period, and produced by the play of light and shadow, where the influence of the West is evident. This latter period marked Akbar's gradual retreat to inwardness and dedication to intellectual and spiritual endeavours. Naturalistic, realistic, and lively depictions of events in early Mughal paintings, which reflected Akbar's achievements and broad range of interests, are also accompanied by more complex elements of individual work,²⁶ which were also common after Akbar's death and under the rule of his son, Jahāngīr. Interest in the depiction of the most varied layers of the human personality begins with the *Akbar-nāma*, which is an outstanding portrait of the king's character. In the work itself, we can follow all three phases of the Akbar's psychological development. The painters also showed external events from the ruler's life, which were full of action and energy. The tendency to depict the inner condition of a person through their external appearance was becoming stronger at this time, and this was how the inner world was manifested on canvas,

26 Portraits were common in most of the Asian painting traditions, but never in such a way as in Mughal arts (Brown 1924, 141). Mongols took their inspiration from the Chinese, and the latter was adopted by Mughals from their Mongolian ancestors. Akbar's love of portraits derived from his interest in different kinds of people.

through colours and images of turbulent events. Therefore, symbolic, philosophical, and religious elements came to dominate the actual external incidents. The portraits perfected in this period reflect the psychological conditions of the people they depict, as influenced by the Indian doctrine on *rasas*. Namely, when depicting human nature the key link was between the exterior and interior—the external manifestation of something triggers some internal experience or indicates a certain internal condition. The painters in this later period tried to depict the internal condition of a person, as manifested by his or her facial expressions, pose of the body, gestures, and movements.

This was also seen in images of animals, which were depicted in paintings which illustrated fables and fairy tales, that were exceptionally popular reading at the ruler's court. Misikin, an especially valued painter at the court, and who was especially skilled at depicting Indian fauna, enthusiastically painted the large Indian cats (tigers, cheetahs, lynxes, leopards, and lions) and animal behaviours, as associated with tales from the collection of Indian animal stories, the *Pañcatantra*. However, in addition to accurately painted animals he also presented caricatured and imaginary beasts, which came “from the Misikin inner zoo” (Cary-Welch 1978, 57), but which at the same time personify various aspects of human nature, which is in accordance with the style of the second period examined in this study.

Already in the early period of Mughal painting, depicting animals and people fighting was a common theme, and on most occasions the predator is human, and one of the young king's favourite activities was hunting. In the paintings of the second period, however, hunting has a symbolic significance. In fights, the king represents God, while the beasts represent various evil powers. Both are a part of the cosmic plan, the fight between good and evil, although the fight itself is not essential, and the process shows the intertwinement of diverse aesthetic experiences (*rasa*), above all *vīra* (heroic), *raudra* (furious), *bhayānaka* (fearful), and *bībhatsa* (grotesque).

This shift to symbolic was inspired by Akbar's second mystic experience, which occurred in 1578, while hunting, and thus announced the new artistic style. This also contributed to the formation of a new religious system. While hunting, claims Abu'l-Fazl,

a sublime joy took possession of his bodily frame. The attraction of cognition of God cast its ray. /.../ About this time the primacy of the spiritual world took possession of his holy form and gave a new aspect to his world-adorning beauty ... What the chiefs of purity and deliverance (i.e. *Sūfī* seers) had searched for in vain, was revealed to him. (Burn 1937, 120)



Fig. 8: “Babram Gur Sees a Herd of Deer Mesmerized by Dilaram’s Music” (folio from an illustrated manuscript the *Khamsa-e-Khusrow*), late 16th Century; attributed to Miskin. Medium: main support: ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper; margins: gold on dyed paper. (Source: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)



Fig. 9: “Buffaloes in Combat”, late 16th Century; attributed to Miskin. Medium: ink, watercolor, and gold on paper. (Source: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)

At that moment, Akbar stopped hunting, disgusted with its cruelty and violence. Therefore, the mood from the early paintings of fights, full of rampage, passion, and energy, was substituted by calm and silence, which radiate from the selection of colours. After this key event, Akbar started to give gold to poor and holy men. He also deepened his interest in spiritual matters, and even more eagerly participated in conversations with philosophers, artists, and followers of various religions. He thus shifted from his function as the ruler of the external realm, who desired to grasp the world in all of its fullness. Instead, he was increasingly interested in conquering the depths, and was thus becoming a seeker of things that were more obscure, unfathomable and harder to grasp, the matters that give the surface its true significance. As such, Akbar led his aesthetic vision to the unknown and not yet conquered zone of that realm where the images on the surface derive from. In this can be seen the influence of Sufism, interlaced with the philosophy of *yoga*. At the same time, it is also possible to notice the convergence of *śānta rasa*, which is the experience of the unspeakable and supreme, thus overcoming all the other aesthetic experiences, which are mostly tied to the profane.



Fig. 10: “Akbar Hunting” (folio from the *Akbar-nāma*), late 16th Century. Medium: opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper. (Source: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)

If the first period of Mughal painting was full of Akbar's insatiable interest for diverse people, lands, and nature—in short, in all the layers of external existence, the others were marked by his shift inwards, through which he tried to attain a common foundation, a common denominator. The Oneness which is basic to all the immeasurable variety of the external. Akbar's aspiration to understand the world and the position of humans within it is accompanied by a desire to understand our relationship with God. In addition to Sufism and *yoga*, it is also possible to identify a clear influence of devotional aesthetics here, which is reflected in the concept of *bhakti*. *Bhakti rasa*, the taste of devotion, the religious pleasure of Oneness, is based on loving devotion to God. Hita Harivamśa, a North Indian Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* poet, composed passionate works about the loving relationship between Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā. This relationship became an archetype of the spiritual love between God and humans or the soul. The way to meet to God was paved with art, which is also reflected in Mughal works. Devotional aesthetics thus had an exceptional influence on Akbar, and so on the development of the arts—Akbar's enthusiasm for the archetypical loving relationship which leads to the experience of Oneness explains the frequency with which Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa appear in paintings of this period. The emotional bond between the two of them represented the path leading to internal fulfilment, where, however, all traces of any kind of relation disappear. Only the sense of Oneness and the unequalled union remain, to which Akbar tried to move in all the periods of his life. Here, it is also possible to notice the manifestation of *śṛṅgāra rasa*, this time in the form of spiritual love, which is closely linked to Sufi romance, the metaphor of the journey of a human soul toward the divine. These facts indicate the stunning integration of the most varied elements of Indian aesthetics and Sufi tradition, which culminated in Akbar's steadfast endeavour to achieve insight into that which is the basis of every religion.

Simultaneously, Akbar's care for restoring equilibrium between the external and internal, and material and spiritual, emerged at this time, and he remained devoted to his political and spiritual project, i.e. achieving social harmony. The idea of needing to reach a consensus between Muslims and Hindus was now accompanied by Akbar's insight that he was the person who was responsible for harmony in the first place—that there would be no unity if he did not research and understand the different aspects of Hinduism in detail. In this process, he reached for his most familiar and effective tool—books, and thus a massive amount of translation took place in this period. Akbar thus formed an intellectual environment where the basic translated works of Hinduism were also studied by Islamic courtiers, i.e. with the intention that they would come to understand Hinduism, and thus deepen and share Akbar's spirit of acceptance, respect, and tolerance.

Akbar's political strategies become dominated by spiritual and intellectual seeking, while also reflecting his sincere interest in India and love for it. This is probably the reason why his main political goal was reached, since

Akbar saw what both Bābur and Humāyūn had never seen—the inherent capabilities of the Indian people, their culture, their aspirations, and their ideals. He realized that the failure of his forebears and also of his co-religionists, who had established themselves in various parts of India, to maintain anything like harmonious rule was due in a measure to their lack of sympathy with the Indian races, to a disregard of their manners and customs, their arts and sciences, and their mental outlook. (Brown 1924, 58)

In taking care to unify a multitude of varied internal empires to achieve harmony of the external world, Akbar, without any doubt, outshined his grandfather and father.

Therefore, parallel with the massive translation projects of this time, a mature style of Mughal painting was created, where Indian elements were most powerfully present. One of the most important translations from Sanskrit to Persian was certainly the *Mahābhārata* (*Razm-nāma*, *The Book of War*, translated between the years 1582 and 1586), an epic with a complex story, and, at the same time, one of the most fundamental Hindu philosophical and religious works. However, Akbar was not enthusiastic about the *Mahābhārata*, due to the martial events and heroics it depicted, having lost his youthful enthusiasm for these. Instead he wanted to get to know India in more detail: from its culture, religion, philosophy, and mythology, to the structure of its society and politics.²⁷ When the translation work of a group of Persian scholars was finished in 1586, the volumes were then prepared for illustrating, with painters contributing 176 pictures. Akbar ordered copies of the resulting *Mahābhārata* to be made, so that this work of exceptional significance would spread over the entire Mughal Empire.

The translation of the *Mahābhārata* was essential for the emergence of many Hindu divinities on canvases of Mughal painters. Akbar's goal of merging varied elements in this context was opposed by the more orthodox members of his court. They were most annoyed by his careless disregard of the *Qur'an's* prohibition on portraying the divine. However, in India such images were desired. In these pictures the various wonders performed by Hindu gods are also portrayed, a further proof of Akbar's open spirit. Depicting Hindu gods in this way had a special

27 Initial Akbar's enthusiasm for the *Mahābhārata* derived from the devotion of Hindus for this extensive work, which was also evident by the stunning recitation of its huge number of stanzas, which is around 100,000.

intention: to present the complex structure of religious life in India to Muslims and to arouse a feeling of religious tolerance towards non-Muslims. Akbar believed that many people blindly trust the religion which they were born into. As such, these people are unable, due to their own actions, to understand the Truth, which is the noblest goal of the human intellect. He therefore provoked people at his court and more broadly to have a greater openness of the spirit, and to be more open-minded in order to build knowledge about other religions, for this was the only way to understand their own religion. He believed that one single religion could not have a monopoly on the Truth, for the Truth is immeasurably multi-layered. The most skilful painter in his work on the *Mahābhārata* was Daswant'h, who is believed to have been the main painter at Akbar's court in this period. As reports Abu'l-Fazl in the *Akbar-nāma*: "In a short time he surpassed all the painters", but "the light of his talents was dimmed by the shadow of madness; he committed suicide" (1873, 107). It is most likely that the ambivalences of Daswant'h's personality contributed to his remarkable work, a visual experience not only of the *Māhābhārata* but also of the entire India in all of its immeasurable depth.²⁸

The paintings of the *Mahābhārata* are the case of a Hindu subject and Mughal style of painting in the first period. However, the style was modified due to Akbar's way of thinking. The paintings of the *Mahābhārata* are, due to the nature of the contents of the book, still dynamic and full of action, with the focus on events having been revived. However, in this case, the skilful realism is also intertwined with elements of that which would be described by an unlearned viewer as irrational. In fact, it is only with the visualization of an invisible and unimagined viewpoint of reality that one can understand the essence of an occurrence. The realistic scenes of the bloody war between the Kurus and Pāṇḍus, which include drinking blood from dead bodies, remind us of visions in nightmares at first glance. Otherwise, they state the influence of the *tantric* tradition, which is shown by visually rich images depicting non-depicting and being beyond expression, which Akbar became acquainted with through Sufism, which assimilated certain elements of this tradition. *Tantric* tradition enriched *yoga* practice with elements of magic and mysticism, which is evident in Mughal depictions of the experiences, energies and different layers of existence, as well as its constant transformations, which are experienced by an individual in the process of converging to the invisible, the Supreme. On the journey through various worlds and realities, an individual also encounters traumatic experiences, which is represented in paintings depicting horrible demons, which induce fear and discomfort by the energetic intensity of their presence. However, they show themselves as such only to the unlearned, the

28 Two of Daswant'h's exceptional images in the *Mahābhārata* are "A Night Assault on the Pāṇḍava Camp" (1582–1586) and "Bhima Kills the Brothers of Kichaka" (1582–1586).



Fig. 11: “A Night Assault on the Pāṇḍava Camp” (1582–1586); attributed to Daswānt’ḥ and Sarwan. (Source: Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons)



Fig. 12: “Bhīma Kills the Brothers of Kichaka” (1582–1586); attributed to Daswānt’ḥ, Miskin. (Source: Wikimedia Commons, Creative Commons)

one who suffers the pains of attachment to his own small ego, which develops fear as a defensive mechanism. Therefore, it is a case of needing to shift from the usual perception and visions to visualization of the inner world, the various visions that arise in meditative experiences and which lead to an awakening which exceeds even the most vivid imagination.

Daswant'h definitely succeeded in creating a deep aesthetics of ambivalence, which unites the luxury and diversity of various occurrences, the ravishment of life, and the traumatizing of imminent destruction, all marked by a hint of the presence of the invisible. In the background of the visual experience intertwining philosophy, religion, mythology, ahistoricity, and reality, there is an affirmation of all the layers of existence as well as Akbar's attempt to comprehend the core of Hinduism, which he recognized as the same in all the religions, among which there is, in fact, no difference. Any differences there appear to be are thus only a product of ignorance.

Depicting Non-depicting: Aesthetics of the Late Period of Mughal Painting (1596–1605)

In the last decade of Akbar's rule, the dynamic style of the first and partially second period is replaced by peaceful, quiet, contemplative, and poetic illustrations with extreme minimalism in terms of events, without any rich narrative contents. This shows the last twist in Akbar's personality, which was conditioned by a sense of the closeness of death. The space on the canvas was suddenly apportioned to the emptiness too, which replaced the dynamics of the earlier images. The paintings become a kind of flow of thoughts. They show idealistic, remote worlds, different from the everyday. The characters move in an airless space, which is often not bordered with the slopes of the mountains or cities. A deep dimension of the half-empty space is filled by fluid, evasive movement, which is entirely different from the earlier concrete, deliberate and conscious moves and gestures. Instead of heroic zeal, the paintings are pervaded by a certain elegance and emotion, a rather elegiac, gloomy and melancholic atmosphere, along with an insight into death, which again draws Mughal aesthetics nearer to the lyrical Persian style and multi-layered symbolism of pre-Mughal Indian painting.

Animals, which are placed in a lonely, desolate landscape, are a common motif in this era, which inspires an aesthetic feeling of serenity and peace. These motifs, which are placed into a placid, remote environment, create a spiritual atmosphere in nature, and conform with the nature of *sānta rasa*, which is marked by the retreat of the ego and to the interior, and thus replaces the turbulent and profane



Fig. 13: “A Muslim Pilgrim Learns a Lesson in Piety from a Brahman” (folio from an illustrated manuscript the *Khamsa-e-Khusrow*), 1597–98; calligrapher: Mubammad Husain Kashmiri; artist: Basāwan. Medium: image: ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper; margins: gold on dyed paper. (Source: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)



Fig. 14: “Royal Horse and Runner” (illustrated album leaf), 16th–17th Century. Medium: ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. (Source: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)



Fig. 15: “Portrait of Emperor Akbar Praying” (illustrated single work), early 17th Century. Medium: ink and gouache on paper. (Source: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*)

events of the early period of the Mughal arts, and the dynamic quest for Oneness from the mature period of Mughal painting, which is marked by the most varied experiences. In addition, individual portraits are also present here,²⁹ based on the revelation of certain layers of personality and individual moments in time, which seem unimportant at first glance but are still vital the character portrayed and his mental condition. In such works Akbar’s interest in human personality is reflected, in all its nakedness and mystery, imperfections and virtues, evasive surface and incomprehensible depth. The portraits from this period are a true psychological study, vital spiritual documentaries. Through these depictions “those that have passed away, have received a new life, and those who are still alive, have immortality promised them” (Abu’l-Fazl 1873, 109). Under the direction of Akbar, his painters managed to capture that which is most evasive—the soul, its transience and, simultaneously, eternity. At the same time, Akbar reached what he had been

29 The fact is that Mughal painting was essentially a masculine art, and the portraits of women are rather rare. “/.../ artists were never allowed to enter the inner regions of women’s quarters, so that their portrayals of girls and women are based on contemporary ideals—although it was generally known what the aristocratic Mughals look like” (Schimmel 2004, 159).

eagerly looking for his entire life. Therefore, in this period, he let himself peacefully move on to the practice of non-depicting.³⁰

Conclusion: Searching for Union in the Immeasurable Variety

Rich Mughal visual depictions of the most diverse layers of reality, marked by a dramatic power, explosive energy, and intensity of communicativeness, and at the same time by serenity, calmness and harmony between sensual pleasures and inner delight, which cannot be entirely captured into words, create a catalogue of a fascinating fragment of the history of India, written and painted by Akbar the Great. The charismatic ruler, who paved the path to a new understanding of the world and who found home in every single religion, managed to create a home for everybody and the rule of peace, as well as material and intellectual-spiritual welfare, in his multicultural empire. Islam thus became the juncture of the meeting of diverse religions and universal beliefs through Akbar's restless endeavours for unity, harmony, peace, and truth. Akbar was thus not only an imperialistic mogul and political leader, but also a philosopher, mystic, and eternal truth seeker. The identity of a spiritual leader, caretaker of the material and spiritual layers of reality, based on a true curiosity and enthusiasm about everything that existed, both visible—people, nature, and their creations—and invisible, exceeded naked ambition with regard to the exercise of political power.

In the course of outlining this thesis about the development of Mughal aesthetics as a peculiar reflection of Akbar's personality, his multi-layered thought and different segments of spiritual history of the ruler himself, which also contributed to the extraordinary cultural and religious change from around the early Mughal period, the influences of the European and Persian, but mostly Indian spiritual tradition (*rasa*, *bhakti*, *yoga*, and *tantra*), were illuminated in the paper. Therefore, the complex development of the nature of the Mughal painting was divided into the three periods, parallel with Akbar's personal growth, interests, efforts, and quests, supported by the historical facts and references from the emperor's biography.

30 "The world endures but an hour. Spend it in prayer, for the rest is unseen." The latter idea clearly describes the mood of the late period of Mughal arts in the time of Akbar's rule. This is part of the inscription on one of the arches of Buland Darwaza, or "the Gate of Victory", in the centre of Fatehpur Sikri. On this mighty Islamic architectural monument there are also Jesus's words, carved in stone, entirely in Akbar's style, of course. The entire inscription says: "Isa (Jesus), Son of Mary (on whom be peace) said: The World is a Bridge, pass over it, but build no houses upon it. He, who hopes for a day, may hope for eternity; but the World endures but an hour. Spend it in prayer, for the rest is unseen."

In the early period of Mughal painting (1556–1579), the influences of the Indian doctrine on aesthetics are reflected. The latter is based on various aesthetic feelings (*rasas*). In the paintings from this period, the manifestation *śṛṅgāra rasa* is most visible, which is also in accordance with Akbar's interests of the time and with his aspiration to grasp the immeasurable greatness of the profane, which is, at the same time, also the source of numerous sensual pleasures. In the visual richness of these images, a deeper spiritual dimension is also present, which is evident in the emperor's interest in that what is hidden under the surface, and is the basis of all the variety of occurrence. As such, the influence of Sufism was indicated in the discussion, and this was enriched with the teachings of *yoga* in Akbar's time. The latter teachings supplemented Sufi efforts to achieve mystic revelation and converge with a sense of Oneness. However, Akbar sought Oneness, the supreme foundation of everything, not only as a philosopher, but also as a political leader, wherein his ethical deportment is reflected. Namely, he realized his striving for Oneness as a philosopher, mystic, and believer in the context of his social reality, where he strived for unity and union. His means of achieving the harmony in the context of the spiritual as well as social reals were the arts. The more intensive quest for union and harmony which was supplemented by his youthful enthusiasm to become acquainted with all the layers of visible occurrence is evident in works from the mature period of the Mughal style (1580–1595), which is still marked with an orientation towards to wealth of the profane, but deeper quests are also raised to a larger extent. The influence of Vaiṣṇava devotional tradition is present in these works of arts, and this had an exceptional influence on Akbar and was an excellent addition in his assimilation of the supreme, God, and Oneness through the Mughal arts. The concept of *bhakti*, which is thus reflected in various depictions from this period, radiates the other dimension of *śṛṅgāra rasa* as spiritual love, and devotion to the superlative, where it converges with the aesthetic feeling of *śānta rasa*, the supreme experience of peace and Oneness. However, before the realization of supreme serenity, the retreat to the interior, the second period of Mughal arts was interlaced with a quest for balance between the external and internal, which is evident in the wild, energetic events which symbolize dynamic internal experiences and, at the same time, Akbar's zealous quest for Oneness through the arts. Here, the influence of the *tantric* tradition is present, which Akbar also became acquainted with through Sufism. In the late period (1596–1605), however, the retreat into the interior is visible in the works of art and in the process of a more abstract visual conception that creates an aesthetic inner delight, marked with peace and serenity, which also coincides with Akbar's turbulent and dynamic quests. When listing the influences of certain Indian traditions on the development of Mughal arts, it is worth emphasizing that Akbar was—in addition to drawing on such the elements and taking inspiration from

them—to a great extent admirable for preserving their autonomy and enabling their further existence and development. Therefore, he enhanced and encouraged Hindu cultural, religious and philosophical development at the heart of a Muslim empire.

It is a fact that Mughal period in India—with regard to the unfathomable dimensions of time—is only a fragment in the history of India and Islam. However, this period has not been outshined, for it is above time and always topical, if we consider the influences and immeasurable greatness of the cosmopolitan spirit and atmosphere which were created by Akbar at his court, and which pervaded his empire as a whole. Nowadays, Akbar's appeal, which overcomes all racial, religious and cultural limitations, is resonating especially sonorously.

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