

# The Body in Visualisations and Images

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## Translating the Body Into Image. The Body Politic and Visual Practice at the Mughal Court During the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries\*

*This article investigates the ways in which visual representations reconfigured the body in North Indian political culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While images were meant to transmit and translate ethical conceptions of the polity, communicative modes of the visual medium followed a dynamic that was not a rehearsal of the path taken by texts. As images cut across distinctions formulated elsewhere and drew up new boundaries, they worked to refine and pluralise the understandings of political culture beyond the normative. Pictorial experiments at the North Indian courts involved negotiating multiple regimes of visibility and arriving at pictorial choices that ended up creating a new field of sensibilities, especially the corporeal. An argument is therefore made for the agency of the visual in defining new ideas of the political body that were constitutive of politico-ethical ideals in early modern North India.*

**Key Words:** Painting; North India; Corporeality; Body Politic; Visibility

... the body is a tool and an instrument for the soul, like the tools and instruments used by artisans and craftsmen. It is not, as some people conceive, the soul's receptacle or locus ...

(Nasir-al Din Tusi, *Akhlaq-i Nasiri*)

He [i.e. the King] is continually attentive to the health of the body politic, and applies remedies to the several diseases thereof. And in the same manner that the equilibrium of the animal constitution depends upon an equal mixture of elements, so also does the political constitution become well-tempered by a proper division of ranks ... a multitude of people become fused into one body.

(Abu'l Fazl Allami, *Ain-i Akbari*)

Ethico-political writings of pre-colonial South Asia define moral and political authority in bodily terms, postulating an indissociable relationship between the physical body of an individual and the body politic. In this constellation of ideas, which remained in sway for nearly three hundred years, the king, the body and the land were described as composed of mixtures of different humours which gave

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\* For Neeladri Bhattacharya and Kumkum Roy, companion historians and friends of many years. I wish to acknowledge my debt to Muzaffar Alam whose authoritative writings on the languages of political Islam in South Asia have been a rich source of knowledge.

them their distinct attributes. A balance of these elements was held to be the secret of good governance, social harmony and ecological plenitude. Such a notion of the body politic was intended to secure a sense of community: good governance came to be an “embodied” science rather than an abstract one, one which through references to bodily experiences worked towards cementing subjects to the kingdom (cf. BAYLY 1998, pp. 12f.). This article addresses the ways in which the body was configured within visual practice at the Mughal court as a medium to transmit ethical conceptions of the polity. Harnessing the body as medium also meant making the body a subject of visual representation. Translating ethical texts into images was a complex process that involved negotiating multiple regimes of visibility which made up the pluralistic cultures of north Indian courts during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and arriving at pictorial choices that did not necessarily create a direct equivalence with the written word. My arguments draw upon important recent studies of north Indian political culture, especially those of Muzaffar Alam, Chris Bayly and Rosalind O’Hanlon. At the same time this essay engages with the research of these historians to argue for the vital agency of the visual in constituting political culture. Visual representations were on the one hand integral to Mughal manuscript production that juxtaposed images to texts. Yet the communicative modes of the visual medium followed a dynamic that was not a rehearsal of the path taken by texts. Composers of painted images inevitably drew upon an available reservoir of political ideas, narrative themes and normative precepts expounded in politico-ethical writings and which circulated through multiple channels and interpenetrated popular wisdom. Reconfiguring these as image was a more slippery process, as we move to a domain in which different sensory routines and ritual habits that impinge on the specific corporeal experience of vision come into play directly and with urgency. This also meant that as images cut across distinctions formulated elsewhere and drew up new boundaries, they worked to refine and pluralise the understandings of political culture beyond the normative. Pictorial experiments were often open ended, created a new field and range of sensibilities, especially the corporeal, that could then be reworked into a language to define new ideals of the political body, which historians have closely examined and eloquently written about.<sup>1</sup>

The *Akhlaq-i Nasiri* by Nasir-al din Tusi (1207-1274) was among the several popular ethical treatises, referred to as *akhlaqi* literature, which circulated in the courts of north India in a variety of recensions from the fifteenth century onwards. Tusi’s text, since its arrival in Gujarat in the late fifteenth century (cf. ALAM 2004, p. 50), drew up a model of virtue that was premised on the notion of bodily purity and perfection. The model referred to three domains regarded as homologous: the kingdom, the household and the body (cf. O’HANLON 2007). Thus the first discourse in Tusi’s work deals with *tahzib-i akhlaq*, that is the regulation of different aspects of an individual’s bodily and moral dispositions, the second deals with the regulation of households and the third with the wider domain of the state.

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1 See especially ALAM 2004; O’HANLON 1999; O’HANLON 2007; RICHARDS 1998a; BAYLY 1998.

Virtue consisted of a proper balance between natural (i.e. bodily) desires and emotions, the ruler's duty in turn was to balance different elements and types of people within the polity, making justice or equity (*adl*) the highest political virtue. Tusi's text was widely read and enjoyed considerable authority among Mughal political elites. In the 1580's it was copied, illustrated, sumptuously bound and kept in the imperial *kitabkhana*, where precious manuscripts were both produced as well as preserved. A large number of recensions and copies proliferated through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and were also referred to by rulers of the regional courts following the shrinking of Mughal sovereignty, more so as these ideas found an echo in texts from non-Muslim traditions such as in Vijayanagara, Rajasthan or Maharashtra (cf. ALAM 2004, pp. 61-80; BAYLY 1998, pp. 13ff.).

In the 1580's Akbar's court historian and close friend Abu'l Fazl drew substantially on the tenets of Nasirean ethics while formulating his political ideals of enlightened monarchy in the monumental illuminated history *Akbarnama* and its compendium the *Ain-i Akbari*. In this ideological format of a divinely sanctioned kingdom, Akbar emerges as "the perfect man" (*insaan-i kamil*) whose virtues of self-control, renunciation of worldly desires and ability to enforce justice were the groundwork of an empire where universal harmony (*sulh-i kul*) prevailed. This and other contemporary histories are replete with information about norms of bodily comportment, marriage regulations, sexual practices among imperial servants, especially in relation to homosexual love (O'HANLON 2007, p. 892). In Abu'l Fazl's history Akbar emerges as the embodiment of moral and physical perfection, a paternal figure for the kingdom and above all a man in full control of his exceptional bodily powers. Indeed the emperor's perfect body came to function as a metonym for the health of the body politic. Such a notion found expression in court rituals such as the *khilat*, or granting of a robe of honour, an artefact associated with the king's person, to a loyal subject (cf. GORDON 2001): acceptance meant incorporation into the kingdom through the medium of the royal body.

### **Between *tahzib* and *darshan***

The ideas enumerated above came to be enmeshed with the cultural fabric of the north Indian courts not least through their visual articulations. Painting signalled one important kind of public moment in which the body functioned as instrument of the soul. The centrality of the visual medium to communicative habits and practices of the north Indian regions meant that most court histories and manuscripts from the sixteenth century onwards were composed as a combination of text and images, with images intended to illustrate the text and fix its meanings. In practice however the relationship between the two tended to be more ambivalent and slippery. The image, because of its imprecision, open-ended qualities and possibility of multiple readings, lent itself less easily than the written word to functioning as a sign of absolute truth. Less abstract than the calligraphic word, the image opened up more to the eye through sensual perception and comprehension.

Indeed the act of viewing involved a bodily experience of placing oneself in relation to a painted image, which in its turn possessed the powers of evoking more directly and effectively experiences and memories of bodily routines.

For these reasons, that made it difficult to fully control the workings of images, the choice of visualisation as a communicative mode was caught up in a series of tensions between courtly patrons and members of the Muslim orthodoxy. The arts of figural representation in the Islamic regions proliferated in spite of continuing conflicts with theological authority. Muslim rulers on the Indian subcontinent in addition encountered belief systems in which images were created and maintained in a constant ritual context of devotion, service and attendance.<sup>2</sup> Practices of visual representation at the Mughal and other regional courts had therefore to negotiate multiple traditions, not only to repudiate bondage to orthodox opinion, but to realise a visual ideal of *tahzib-i akhlaq*, of perfect regulation of bodily and moral dispositions. In a well-known passage of the *Ain-i Akbari*, Abu'l Fazl draws a parallel between the way the mystic uses his body to reach God and the practice of the artist, who through the medium of paint and brushes transforms earthly substances into an ethereal notion of beauty (cf. *Ain-i Akbari*, Vol. 1, pp. 113f.). The viewing of a work of art too—at close, intimate range, solitary and with intense concentration—imbued the act of seeing with a devotional quality that was also in a special sense a physical one. Unlike a larger canvas painting where the viewer moves back and forth physically to locate himself in relation to the painting, a viewer of a miniature had to find an imaginary path to complete bodily and emotional immersion in a work as a condition of access to it.

Visibility, vision and visuality—all formed channels through which ritual practice, bodily experience and images interposed on and codified each other. The Sanskrit term *darshan* meaning both “sight” or “vision” and also the “act of beholding,” was central to Mughal court ceremonial, marked by regular appearances of the emperor, often several times within the space of a day. The religious concept of *darshan* had been under the Hindu monarchies of the early medieval period transferred to the institution of kingship (INDEN 1998, pp. 74f.). Its adaptation and codification into a ceremonial practice by the Mughals served as a sign of distinction that set them apart from their Safavid and Ottoman counterparts. In the ceremony of *jharokha-i darshan* instituted by the Mughal rulers, the emperor together with the rising sun appeared before his subjects at the *jharokha*, a special window of his palace which framed his appearance and overlooked a gathering of devoted subjects assembled below. Many of these subjects would fast before they viewed the emperor’s face. This spelt the assurance of his continued existence without which they feared the collapse of their universe. Painted images, in turn, were animated by the ritual of viewing the royal person. By “re-presenting” a body that was once present, but no longer is, royal portraits in Mughal painting sought to bridge an absence in time by effecting an omnipresence of the royal

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2 Discussed at length in DAVIS 1997.

body. The image drew from the ritual its sacral force, its accumulation of emblematic plenitude, in turn it assured to the ritual its fixity.

And yet the ritual of *jharokha-i darshan* was caught up, both in practice and its visualisation, in tensions engendered by the opposing pulls of the *tahzib-i akhlaq* and the anthropomorphism that inhered in Hindu devotional practice. In Hindu ritual the act of seeing is contingent on reciprocity, on the belief that the deity is endowed with powers that are mobilised through the ocular relationship between the devotee and the deity which flows from the act of *darshan*. The corporeal and emotional experience of *darshan* could only be engendered by the presence of a deity that “gazes directly back” at the beholder (cf. PINNEY 2003, pp. 115f.).<sup>3</sup> The Mughal ritual, on the other hand, was framed architecturally and spatially in a way that the two gazes, that of the subject and the emperor, never met.<sup>4</sup> The normative demands of the *akhlaq-i tahzib*, which expounded in great detail the attributes of a virtuous ruler in full control of passions (cf. *Akhlaq-i Nasiri*, First Discourse, esp. pp. 122ff.) translated into a language of disjuncture that came to be built in the ritual as also in the pictorial idioms that were animated by it. Royal portraits framed the appearance of the emperor by encasing it within multiple painted borders, or *hashiyas*, which the eye had to traverse, one after the other, in order to gain access to the imperial person.<sup>5</sup> The unvarying painterly choice of the profile presented a face that could be gazed at, but never looked back, never presented a personality that revealed signs of unfolding, of imperfect control. Painted faces came to possess a visual quality that was ostensibly similar to deities—distant, flat, iconic, and inscrutable—rendered through thick overpainting and burnishing, and yet ocular asymmetries prevented the gaze from functioning as a mode of sensual enchantment.<sup>6</sup> Instead the artists rebounded on the rest of the imperial body as the locus of ideals—physical hardiness, valour, intrepidity—and as the expressive medium par excellence within visual practice.

### Journeys through the painted page

Transforming the body into an image, to render it tangible as an “instrument of the soul,” confronted the court painter with a set of challenges. Visualisation demanded that the power of the king’s body be represented as outwardly directed and expressive, suggesting at the same time a concentration of inner energies. While the artist had to find an expressive medium to constitute physical prowess

3 There is a growing literature on *darshan*: ECK 1981; BABB, 1981; GELL 1998. In her exemplary study of popular media in recent times, Christiane BROSIUS (2003) has elaborated the notion of “intervisuality” to flesh out the ways in which new media harness older practices of seeing.

4 A description of the ritual in ROE 1967.

5 See for instance the portrait of the emperor Shah Jahan on the peacock throne, attributed to Govardhan (c.1635, the *hashiya* was completed in 1645), Harvard University Art Museums, Private Collection (651.1983), colour reproduction in the exhibition catalogue, BRAND 1996, no. 71, p. 104.

6 Commenting on this quality, François BERNIER (1992, p. 255) had described the Mughal painters as being “chiefly deficient ... in the expression of the face.”

and bravery as embodied qualities, these qualities needed to be purged of any hint of excess, or of unrestrained emotional fervour, so as to add up to an image of a complex, yet resolved individual in full control of his powers and passions. The text of the *Akbarnama* is full of descriptions of Akbar's heroic feats—of dramatic elephant fights, of rebellions successfully crushed, hunting expeditions and victories on the battlefield—descriptions which leave little doubt as to his extraordinary bodily strength and courage matched by moral perfection. Rendering these textual images in paint was however not a tension free process, also in view of the iconographic choices artists at the north Indian courts had to constantly negotiate. Well into the third quarter of the sixteenth century, *paramparas* (pictorial traditions) from different regions of north India provided the Mughal atelier with a substantial core of artists who, together with a handful of Iranian *ustads* (master artists), conceptualised and gave shape to the emergent Mughal *qalam*. Early products of the atelier are marked by a visual practice that resorted to a minimization of means, a synoptic mode of rendering objects and gestures, often brought to light by rapidly modulated suggestions of movement, calligraphic and otherwise.<sup>7</sup> Such a practice was premised on a fairly sophisticated code of communication, which each of these traditions had internally evolved and whose specific meanings and communicative strategies would have been accessible to those familiar with its complex manipulative range. A painting visualised through shared conventions, additively plotted, generally possessed an open-endedness<sup>8</sup> that enabled the viewer to add elements so as to conjure it fully. In other words, the body of a painted image remained partially empty until the eye of an informed viewer inhabited it by inserting fresh perceptions. Such a possibility of investing personal visions brought with it the perils of ambiguity which threatened to destabilise the certitudes of ideology.

As opposed to indigenous *paramparas*, new forms of naturalism transported by European works of art, that had made their way into the Mughal *kitabkhana* from the 1570's onwards, seemed at first glance better equipped to translate into paint the powerful ideals contained within the notion of *akhlaq-i tahzib*. At the same time the naturalistic idiom brought with it different conceptions of perspectival norms—the Italian Albertian and the Flemish North European<sup>9</sup>—that animated European works of art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Both these systems of representation transformed that which was depicted into “image-as-memory,” by placing the viewer in a privileged position of control that at the same time led him to forget his presence and agency. In other words, by fixing the gaze within the frame of an image, perspective created the fiction of a gaze disengaged

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7 See for instance the illustrated manuscript of the *Tuti-Nama* (Tales of a Parrot), completed in the 1580's. While one version is located in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, there is another in the Cleveland Museum of Art. On the latter, CHANDRA 1976.

8 This quality has been referred to as the “*gestalt* of an incomplete work of art,” see SHEIKH 1997, p. 15.

9 For a discussion of these distinct modes, ALPERS 1983, p. 133-142.

from the body (cf. BELTING 2008, pp. 24f.). Negotiating these different visual regimes, Mughal court artists constantly strove to balance an idiom of creating tactile bodily forms with an image that involves the viewer as active participant in an unfolding narrative. The Albertian organisation of space wherein the human body, placed at the centre of the perspectival grid, functions as the measure of all things, came to be bypassed in north Indian painting of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in favour of bodies picturised according to symbolic size, and above all to privilege a mode of viewing wherein the viewer “travels” through the composition, unit by unit, to piece it together. Such a choice meant seeking recourse once more to more corporeal forms of traditional viewing experience akin to those built into Hindu rituals.

The ways in which such a process of balancing and selection was effected can be observed in the double page miniature of the *Akbarnama*, painted by the artists Miskin and Mansur, which portrays the emperor Akbar engaged in a hunt near Lahore (figs. 1-2). The artists strove to incorporate and compress into a single two-dimensional picture space different stages of the narrative of an event that spread over a number of days and nights. The textual account of this was plotted in chronological sequence over several pages of the manuscript (cf. *Akbarnama*, Vol. 2, pp. 416ff.). The image of the hunt starts off on the left page, where the emperor is shown galloping vigorously across the middle ground of the double page pictorial area, first having shot an arrow which pierces into the rear of an antelope, and then continuing onto the next page in pursuit of further prey. At the same time hundreds of beaters bearing burning torches herd—and have already herded—the game into the hunting area encircled by a makeshift wooden fence. In the middle ground, to the right hand, the captured game is being skinned. The royal tent too has been brought from its customary location at a secure distance from the site of the hunt to be placed in the middle of the densely packed hunting circle. The intense drama and vibrant energy of the hunting expedition, which signified a struggle with and suppression of the potentially threatening and evil forces of the universe, is communicated through a partially naturalistic mode that breaks from earlier synoptic codes to show a sea swirling with lithe animal bodies, counterposed by the intense vitality of the emperor’s body, fixed in perfect control over his rapidly galloping steed. The pictorial choice of the artists is not for a narrative centred around a single point; rather movement is denoted through redrawing space and locating objects and persons in it at multiple points. At the same time the mobile plasticity of the hundreds of bodies—of deer, antelopes, cheetahs and of humans—that populate this image, prevent it from disintegrating into fragments. This is achieved through a composition which moves in a spiral, taking off from the tent in the centre and continuing in concentric circles out to the fence perimeter. The spiral also creates a space for Akbar at the centre, without detracting from the suggestion of lightning pace with which he gallops across the picture space. While painted faces are held within the firm grip of the graphic line, flattened so as to suppress expressive tremors, modelling is applied selectively to



the animal and human bodies, even as they retain their predominantly linear aesthetic. It is significant that the division of labour among Mughal artists was organised according to principles which distinguished between the three separate functions described above: devising the composition (*tarah*), rendering the faces (*chihra nami*) and colouring (*rang amezi*), which included the modelling of bodies.

The paintings of the *Akbarnama* are replete with images like the one described above—that is, crowded with figures, each one characterised by individual bodily movement and energetic gestures, the whole composed around complex geometrical patterns that direct the viewer's gaze through the stages of the narrative. We see Akbar leaping onto a wild elephant, trying to tame it as it tramples over a bridge of boats, while terrified retainers and nobles flee or appeal to providence,<sup>10</sup> elsewhere supervising building operations at the site of the new capital Fatehpur Sikri.<sup>11</sup> In other scenes, where the emperor is not physically present in the picture frame, closely knit groups of people held together by variety of posture and gesture—in short through a special new language of bodily codes—are crucial to narrative strategies of these images.<sup>12</sup> Frequent instances draw our attention to the ways in which artists worked their way through different cultural codes and struggled with the problem of resolving these pictorially. To take one example: the expression of physical courage and bodily strength needed to be distinguished from unrestrained anger or martial rage that would disrupt the complex balance that made up the *tahzib-i akhlaq*. Tusi's ethical model drew upon Aristotlean philosophy of sufficiency and moderation to argue for bodily health as a path to ensure the health of the soul (cf. *Akhlaq-i Nasiri*, p. 118). It presented man's inner being as composed of three faculties: the rational, the irascible and the concupiscible. The first was located in the brain, the "seat of reflection and reason," the second in the heart, the source of anger, bravery, drive, in short "the mine of innate heat," and the third in the liver, the body's "organ of nutrition and of distribution" (*Akhlaq-i Nasiri*, p. 43). The first discourse of the *Akhlaq-i Nasiri* juxtaposes a description of anger with a prescription of how to remedy it through restraint and self control. The physical manifestations of anger, a motion of the soul, are rendered as: "... the blood begins to seethe, and the brain and arteries are

10 Double page miniature by Basawan and Chitra depicting Akbar's adventures with the elephant Hawai, Victoria and Albert Museum London, repr. in *SEN* 1984, plates 21-23, pp. 70-73.

11 Miniature painted by Tulsi (composition), Bandi (modelling) and Madhu Khurd (faces), Victoria and Albert Museum London, repr. in *SEN* 1984, plate 61, p. 138.

12 In a painting illustrating the siege of the Rajput fortress of Ranthambhor, reputed for its impregnability, the artists, Miskin and Paras have succeeded in creating a pictorial expression of compressed bodily energy and effort. It is an image of some hundred men and bullock carts forcing their way uphill through a narrow and steep gorge in the valley of the Ran, so as to transport heavy cannons to the top of the hill from where the troops could fire at the fort of the Rajput rule of Ranthambhor. The deliberate massing of bodies, each caught in a distinct movement and collectively pushing and heaving includes the viewer who, too, journeys across the steep diagonal of the composition, participating in the physical momentum of the whole. The miniature belongs to *Akbarnama* manuscript housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum London, repr. in *SEN* 1984, plates 52-53, pp. 120ff.

filled with a dark vapour, so that the intelligence is cut off by a veil ... the human frame becomes as a mountain cave, filled with a blaze of fire and choking with flame and smoke, from which are recognized only noise and sound ...” (*Akhlaq-i Nasiri*, p. 128). After outlining the ten causes of anger and the seven categories under which its consequences could be classified, Tusi prescribes “the management of the intelligence” as the treatment of this “disease.” The discourse alternates between description, prescription and resolution which is summed up as: “... the course of intelligence and respect the condition for Justice, which necessarily produces equilibrium.” (*Akhlaq-i Nasiri*, pp. 129-135). The political culture of the Mughal court, constituted through a continuous engagement with a plurality of regional traditions and practices, meant reaching out to and incorporating concepts that did not always focus on a resolution of the kind advocated as *tahzib-i akhlaq*: for example, notions of honour such as the Rajput idea of direct personal sacrifice, articulated through explicit emotionality, through practices and a habitus in which the bodily and the emotional fused. Mughal politics was marked by efforts to bring about a transfer of this particular sense of personal honour from the lineage onto a more impersonal register of imperial pride and belonging (cf. RICHARDS 1998b, p. 288).

An effort to grapple with these positions and challenges in the domain of the visual can be followed through in a painting, again from the *Akbarnama*, composed by the artist Miskin, who also painted the faces, and by Shankar who executed the colouring and modelling of figures.<sup>13</sup> The narrative, recounted through several pages of the text, centres on an incident where Akbar, seized by fury, punishes his foster brother Adham Khan for conspiring to assassinate the imperial *wazir*, by flinging Adham Khan down from the terrace of the upper *zenana* apartments. The towering rage prompting this action is rendered pictorially through a series of contrasts: between the rigid, expressionless figure of the emperor, framed by the doorway of the terrace apartment and the panic-stricken figures below, fleeing in different directions, moving and gesticulating rapidly; between the austere white wall and stairway and the frenzy of colour patterns and contrasts that resonate through the agitated bodies, and above all in the dramatic plummeting form of Adham Khan which, marked by the archetypal contrast of red, green and black, creates a chromatic focal point. The same contrast is mirrored in the reverse in the dress of the figure of the messenger, Farhat Khan, standing above. The contrast of red and green, often used to draw attention to imperial figures in portraits, and signifying an embodied resolution of oppositions, is significantly transposed here on to the object of imperial action, while the main actor, the emperor, is dressed in subdued colours that draw our attention only through the contrasting dark frame of the doorway. The action itself is one inspired by the larger motive of justice but executed through an act of uncontrollable rage. Again, the figure of the emperor, face in inscrutable profile, remains iconic and distant—only the rigid stance of his

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13 *Akbarnama*, Victoria and Albert Museum London, repr. in SEN 1984, plate 25, p. 76.

flexed limbs and above all the hand tightly gripping the scimitar suggest the tension inherent in anger and the need to govern it.

### **Beyond likeness**

The agency of bodily codes in the public construction of elite status and above all of imperial authority meant that portraits came to acquire a new importance as a painted genre. By representing a body no longer charged with kinetic energy and in constant movement, portraits of members of the imperial elite, by their quality of being more contained images, registered a different and perhaps shifting understanding of humoral aspects of the body in relationship to material environment and inner equilibrium. While portraits were designated as “likeness” (*taswir, citra*), they did not necessarily strive to achieve perfect individuation as a means of recognition, in the sense contemporary European portraits sought to do. Abu’l Fazl’s oft cited statement in the *Ain-i Akbari* observes: “His Majesty himself sat for his likeness, and also ordered to have the likenesses taken of all the grandees of the realm. An immense album was thus formed: those that have passed away have received a new life, and those who are still alive have immortality promised to them.” (cf. *Ain-i Akbari*, Vol. 1, p. 115) “Drawing the likeness” (cf. *Ain-i Akbari*, Vol. 1, p. 113) however meant drawing upon a reservoir of normative materials that laid down the physical attributes of persons according to rank and gender, so that a portrait would enable recognition on the basis of those qualities that were held to mark individuals as kings or noblemen.

Literary discussions of portraiture on the Indian subcontinent before the advent of the Turkish and Mughal rulers focus primarily on gods and kings, leaving the painter more or less free to render other social groups according to his own imaginative preferences. An important iconographic text of the sixth century AD, the *Citrakshana* of Nagnajit deals extensively with the *lakshanas* or bodily attributes of men of rank, especially the *Cakravartin* (lit. wheel-turning master, universal ruler). His arms, for instance, are precisely described: “The upper arm of the Master of Men is symmetrical as the tail of a bull; when he stands erect, both the hands touch the knees.” Further *lakshanas* according to Nagnajit: “...the nails should resemble the half moon, should be of red colour and lustrous, illumined like the pupils of the eye...,” the teeth “even shaped, thickly set, shining pure, sharp and white, white as the pearls, as cow’s milk, as the stem of the lotus, as a heap of snow... The Great Man turning the Wheel should be represented ... with the gait of the King of Elephants ... he has the sharpness of mond of the leader of Bulls, the strength of a King of Lions, the majesty of a King of Wild Geese; such is the outward appearance of the Master of Men.” (citation by GOSWAMY 1986, p. 195). Long descriptions based on similies drawn from flora and fauna inspired the stylisation of the human body to add up to an image of extraordinary majesty.

While literary texts that created a blueprint for portraits circulated in courtly milieus over many centuries, painted portraits themselves made an appearance from the sixteenth century onwards, primarily under the patronage of the Mughal elite.

Other north Indian courts as well as those in the Deccan responded to the Mughal example, so that from the mid-sixteenth century onwards a veritable efflorescence of the genre can be observed. Following from Ananda.K. Coomaraswamy's sharply drawn distinction between Rajput and Mughal painting, most art historical writing well into the present operates on the assumption that as opposed to Rajput and other north Indian regional styles, Mughal portraits were inspired overwhelmingly by naturalistic concerns, and their execution followed from an observation of physical details and inner states. The term "psychological realism" has been used in connection a discussion of European "influence" on Mughal art. Yet Mughal portraits too drew upon panegyric descriptions by court historians, on mythical traditions, symbols of royalty and importantly on cultural ideals of etiquette such as *adab*, and other textual constructions of ideal masculinity for their inspiration. High sounding names which Mughal emperors assumed upon accession—Jahangir (he who seizes the world) or Shah Jahan (king of the world), Alamgir (lion of the world)—all resonate with the panegyric flavour of *Cakravartin*. Portraits systematically assimilated into their pictorial programme symbolic objects such as the globe, the lion and the lamb, the nimbus, the weighing scales, to translate such rhetoric. The symbolism of light—rendered through the halo, or often emanating from within the figures, painted in luminous colours against plain, dark backgrounds, had its origins in an imperial myth: the story handed down by generations of chroniclers wherein the semi-mythical ancestress of the Mughal clan, the Mongol princess Alanqwa, was impregnated by a miraculous ray of divine light that then was transferred from one emperor to the next. The distant view of the emperor's profile which became the norm for elite portraits was, as seen earlier, hardly an effective idiom within which to render an unfolding personality. Bodily definitions in Mughal portraits followed their own set of conventions rather than a concern for physiognomical exactitude. In his memoirs the emperor Jahangir describes his father Akbar as follows:

In stature he was of medium height. He had a wheaten complexion and black eyes and eyebrows. His countenance was radiant, and he had the build of a lion, broad of chest with long hands and arms. On his left nostril he had a very beautiful fleshy mole, about the size of a chickpea. Among those who have some expertise in the science of physiognomy such a mole is considered a sign of great good fortune. His august voice was very loud, and he had a particularly nice way of speaking. In his conduct and manners there was no comparison between him and the people of the world—a divine aura was apparent around him. Both greatness in personal worth and regality in lineage, you would say Solomon had placed his ring on his finger. (Jahangirnama, p. 36)

Physical details in this account are framed by panegyric, convention, symbolism of light, while the long arms resemble in all likelihood a favourite *laskhana* of kings formulated by Nagnajit.

The *Mau'izah-i Jahangiri* (Admonitions of Jahangir), a collection of ideas and maxims assembled from Persian, Arabic and Indian sources by an imperial governor, Muhammad Baqir Najm-i Sani, an Iranian migrant to Mughal India, sets

out to describe the qualities required by the ideal of *adab* that an individual should cultivate (cf. ALAM 2004, pp. 61, 75).<sup>14</sup> Though the work itself was never accompanied by illustrations, there appears to be an association or reciprocity between the language of portraits and Baqir's themes and discussions on the inner and outer perfectibility of a cultivated person, on the conventions of dress and the markers of the ideal male body. For instance one of the bodily criteria of ideal manliness named by Baqir was a man whose physique was *kamar band*, that is "waist bound up," meaning at all times prepared for battle and heroic action (cf. O'HANLON 1999, p. 64). This meaning was articulated in portraits, even before Baqir set out to compile his text,<sup>15</sup> which invariably depict the standing male body as firm waisted, a corporeal attribute set into focus by the broad ornamental sash in exquisite silk or brocade, the *patka*, that was worn by every imperial servant appearing in public. Further devices—the sword or dagger, a jewel—functioned to focus attention to the waist as a critical marker. It has indeed been argued that the strong male waist, significant in a military culture that attached exceptional importance to cavalry skills and wielding heavy weapons on horseback, made this feature constitutive of ideal masculinity, which was then counterposed to being "feeble waisted," meant to denote debility or base actions, often associated with women (O'HANLON 1999, p. 64). It is significant however that portraits of aristocratic men and women do not deploy the language of gender difference in the way it has been ascribed to Baqir's text. The portrayal of both men and women by court artists is surprisingly similar, often even interchangeable. Both are marked by almost identical bodily contours, delineated through diaphanous draperies, same delicate facial features, both dress in silks, satin, sumptuous brocades and fine muslins and appear to enjoy shared pleasures in pearls and gems. The quintessential Mughal nobleman is usually shown holding a flower, a jewel or a mirror in a gesture that draws attention to the hands as a marker of refinement (fig. 3).<sup>16</sup> Difference in bodily attributes here cuts across gender lines, instead it is drawn with clarity along the boundaries of social class. The aristocratic body, male and female, transporting ideals of *nazaqat* and *tahzib* (delicacy of demeanour and courtesy) can be effectively counterposed to the working bodies of labourers—male and female—rendered with poignant care in miniatures such as those showing building operations at the Agra fort (figs. 4, 5). Even while contained within the graphic line, the postures, gait and stances of men and women carrying weights, transporting blocks of sandstone along a ramp, driving nails to split a large stone

14 Discussed at some length in O'HANLON 1999, pp. 56ff.

15 See for instance the portrait of Jahangir with bow and arrow, painted c. 1604, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution Washington DC (S 1986.408), excellent colour repr. in *The Jahangirnama*, p. 47.

16 Of the large number of Mughal portraits in this genre only two examples will be cited: Prince Salim as a young man (holding a jewelled mirror), painted by Bichitr, c. 1635, Minto Album, Victoria and Albert Museum London, repr. in OKADA 1992, no. 201, p. 168; Shah Jahan standing on a globe, holding a turban jewel, by Hashim, Dublin, Chester Beatty Library, repr. in JONES 1987, no. 35, p. 53.

block, seated on their haunches while laying bricks or mixing lime—all appear to be articulated through recall of memories of the body in work routines. Observations are however reworked into pictographic formulae, rapid codes such as short, stocky torsos, excessive girth, straining arms that speak their language more effectively than facial expression, which however shows traces of greater differentiation in terms of complexion and features as compared to the aristocratic visage.

The prolific production of portraits at the Mughal court inspired regional principalities to follow this example in an effort to partake of the cultural and political prestige associated with such visual practice. Larger regional kingdoms chose to follow the Mughal format in that portraits were painted with figures clearly detached from coloured backgrounds, rendered in flat colours, though their tones were stronger than those used by Mughal artists—pure yellow, carmine red, sage green. Also rendered in profile, the subjects portrayed were endowed with greater bodily fullness and monumentality, with the forms occupying the picture space till the edges and often threatening to break out of its frame.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly smaller principalities, such as the kingdom of Mandi in the Punjab hills, experimented with their own idiosyncratic modes of portraiture, especially at the beginning of the eighteenth century, a time when the authority of Mughal imperial power was confronted by serious challenges from regional groups such as the Marathas, the Deccani nobles and Pathans. In seeking to assert a distinct regional identity, painters of Mandi drew upon the reservoir of prescriptions for bodily forms, the *lakshanas*, found in traditional texts and interpreted these in unusual ways to create images of extraordinary dramatic force. A particularly striking example is to be found in a series of portraits of the ruler of Mandi, Raja Sidh Sen, from around 1700. To take one example that attempts to give pictorial form to attributes couched in panegyric descriptions found in earlier texts<sup>18</sup>: it shows the Raja bare chested, wearing a Mughal style turban, a long, flowing robe, open down the front to reveal a pair of striped shorts and long, powerfully built thighs and legs that would appear to echo the description of the king Harsha composed by court poet Bana in the *Harshacharita* (7<sup>th</sup> century): “... his broad chest shone like [Mount] Kailasa with a cliff of crystal ... his two thighs were ruby pillars, set to bear the weight of the earth which rested in his heart.” (citation by GOSWAMY 1985, p. xxii). Equally striking are the height of the striding figure and the length of his arms, which the painter has extended to make long enough to reach his knees, one of the most characteristic *lakshanas* of a great man. While the Raja wields a sword, wears a turban ornament, rings, pearl and ruby earrings in the manner of

17 See for example portraits of Raja Gaj Singh of Marwar by a painter of Jodhpur, mid 17th century, National Museum Delhi (63.1789); Raja Karan Singh of Bikaner, mid-17th century, Private Collection, Portrait of Mian Mahipat Dev of Mankot, Mankot c. 1660, Government Museum and Art Gallery Chandigarh, all three repr. in DESAI 1985, plates 27, 28, 30, pp. 31, 34.

18 Raja Sidh Sen of Mandi Walking, c. 1700, Government Museum and Art Gallery Chandigarh (2725), repr. in DESAI 1985, plate 32, p. 37.

Mughal princes and nobles, he also wears the wooden clogs of a *saiva* ascetic, a necklace with an amulet and a white and red auspicious mark on his forehead, all of which refer to his attributes as a religious devotee of Siva. It would seem that one path to the articulation of regional identities in relation to the powerful imperial centre was through the reinvention of earlier, distinct cultural models, wherein the image of the body could function as an important marker to create new forms of allegiance.

### **Embodying the exotic**

The political culture of the Mughal court during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was informed by exchanges of many kinds—material goods, political concepts, visual motifs—with world regions—Europe, Ottoman Turkey, Central Asia—as well as with regions of the Indian subcontinent. Exchanges formed part of a field in which boundaries between the material and the cultural were often fluid, as objects participated in cultural transactions such as practices of gifting, ritual incorporation or missionary efforts. An object had both material value and form, at the same time, as a gift or ritual object, it incorporated the charisma of the giver or particular cosmological notions. Since most material objects entered the Mughal repertoire through alien cultures, they transported different kinds of and often contradictory messages. On the one hand they worked to enhance the prestige of those elites who possessed them, by generating new values such as cosmopolitanism, connoisseurship, access to luxury and the habitus of conspicuous consumption, values which then came to be codified in the genre of *Mirza Namah* texts as attributes of *mirzai*, of cultivated urban gentility.<sup>19</sup> At the same time alien objects, which made up a truly mixed bag—ranging from horses and slave girls to jewels and textiles, clocks of different kinds, porcelain objects, globes, mirrors in gilded frames, crucifixes, maps, paintings and prints—were often a source of diplomatic irritations, especially when drawn into the cultural economy of gifting, for they did not always conform to Mughal codes of value and prestige and produced uncertainties about their display and location.<sup>20</sup> One way of dealing with the alterity of an object seemed to be pictorial incorporation. The body as image now came to function as a stage on which to display luxury goods: naturalistic techniques of representation were selectively and sensitively deployed to render radiant and richly patterned silks, the transparency of muslin, the sheen of pearls or the glitter of rubies on a sword handle. Colour could generate the synaesthetic experience of heat, airiness, the sounds of rippling water or the heady smells of flowers and perfumes. Such visions furnished the existing conceptions of humoural mixtures and the inner equilibrium of the body with sensibilities that enabled their

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19 The emergence of the ideal of *mirzai* has been discussed at length and persuasively by O'HANLON (1999, pp. 68ff.), who however does not address the ways in which the pictorial translation of objects into an image as early as the late 16th century could have been constitutive of these later ideals.

20 For examples, MUKHIA 2004, pp. 104f.

articulation in a new guise. The sensual qualities of an individual's physical environment—its colours, fragrances, textures and sounds—all came to be increasingly regarded as important to creating the right measure of resolution and equilibrium between the body and inner life (cf. O'HANLON 1999, p. 69).

Bodily incorporation of alterity in the pictorial realm, a response to the mimetic pull exercised by otherness, also became a way of cognition and a mode of repositioning the self within a relationship of power. An exotic object translated into an image frequently came to be associated directly with the king's persona, a body that was a metonym for empire. One object which lent itself in remarkable ways to embodiment, transporting in the process a clear ideological message, was the globe. Sumathi Ramaswamy has charted the trajectories of this object which, in its original European setting stood for rationality, intellectual advances and territorial expansion, now relocated could be made to serve a different ideological purpose. The globe was an effective way of pictorialising panegyric titles of the Mughal emperors such as Jahangir and Shah Jahan and their claims to being world rulers; it also functioned to build a bridge between Islamic and Hindu cosmological conceptions of creation (cf. Ramaswamy 2007, pp. 751-782). The meanings of the relocated globe resonated in particular ways primarily through the unmistakable association that paintings forged between the king's body—the most intimate part of the self—and an alien object. Portraits of Mughal emperors show the king either standing on the globe, holding it, handing it over as part of conferring sovereignty to a successor or sitting with it firmly under the feet.<sup>21</sup> In other words, an object originally belonging to the realm of the intellect came to be visualised as an extension of the emperor's body so as to reconfigure the relationship of power the object was intended to spell out.

Modes of pictorial incorporation, like in the case of the globe, furnished a fresh and tangible undergirding to the mutually constitutive relationships between the body, politics and ethics that characterised north Indian court cultures. Yet drawing a close association between an alien object and the king's body also had the potential of generating subversive arguments—stimulated by an excess of signification produced through a multi-layered presence of different visual regimes and the unpredictable entanglement of their original and potential symbolic meanings within the space of a single image. The destabilising arguments in this case centre on the transience of the human body, they are equally about the nature of power and about visual representation itself. This becomes apparent in a particular work—an unusual and at the same time extremely well-known portrait of the emperor Jahangir painted by the artist Bichitr and which is housed in the collection of the Sackler Gallery at the Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC<sup>22</sup>. It

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21 Several examples can be cited, a number have been reproduced in RAMASWAMY 2007.

22 A miniature from the *Jahangirnama* showing the emperor seated on an hour glass, offering a book to a Sufi. A detail is reproduced on the splendid dust jacket of Thackston, *The Jahangirnama*, a full page reproduction on p. 257. For an extensive discussion of this image, JUNEJA 2002.



is an image, I wish to argue, which derives its disruptive power through the interaction between the imperial body and a series of alien objects, an interaction that works to produce disjunctures and drive a wedge into a carefully moulded edifice of an imperial portrait. This oft reproduced painting shows the emperor Jahangir seated on an hourglass transformed into a throne. In a familiar topos, the emperor presents a book to the Sufi saint Hasan Chishti while ignoring the other, more “worldly,” figures placed in a descending row along the left edge of the picture space. These are the Ottoman sultan of Turkey, the English monarch, James I and, interestingly, the painter of this miniature, Bichitr—who positions his self portrait at the end of this line of kings, referring to his symbolic role as “king of the arts.” The overt intention was therefore to articulate a mythical claim of the Mughal emperor to universal rulership, and the artist Bichitr was instructed to create a variation on a theme executed by another court artist, Abu’l Hasan, where Jahangir displays the same arrogant stance while receiving the poet Sa’di and ignoring the presence of Turkish diplomatic representatives.<sup>23</sup> The object associated with the king’s body in Bichitr’s painting is not the globe but an hour glass, a Christian symbol of death and transience. The seated figure of Jahangir is framed by an enormous refulgent aureole that embodies both sun and crescent moon, a symbol which spells a notion of infinite time. In this image it exists in a state of tension with a competing notion of temporality symbolised by the hour glass, whose original associations with death continue to shimmer through the dense accoutrements of a Pax Moghulica. For the artist has deployed the language of naturalistic representation to draw our attention to the sands of time which have run out. In a gesture as if to exorcise the inexorable flow of time, two cupids inscribe directly upon the hour glass the words: “O Shah, may the span of your life be a thousand years.” A comparison of this representation with a more or less contemporaneous portrait of Jahangir embracing his political opponent Shah Abbas<sup>24</sup>, renders the inbuilt tension more evident. While the latter image shows an emperor still in possession of a powerful physique, robust and well-built, Bichitr’s rendering presents us a considerably more aged and haggard-looking Jahangir, as if consciously registering the ravages of time on his body, made tactile through skilfully painted transparent draperies. Death—the disappearance of the body—becomes the all-encompassing horizon that organizes the experience of time and generates all efforts to overcome its workings. The creation of images, generated by the supra-temporal theme of death, was meant to hold a place for the body of the dead person among the living, as Abu’l Fazl had described the objective of the

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23 The left folio of this double page miniature (c. 1615) is located at the Walters Art Gallery Baltimore (W. 688, folio 37) and the right one in the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution Washington DC ( F46.28). Both are reproduced in Thackston, *The Jahangirnama*, pp. 170f., the right page which shows Jahangir seated with the globe under his feet also in RAMASWAMY 2007, Fig. 5.

24 Jahangir embracing Shah Abbas by Abu’l Hasan, Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution Washington DC (45.9), repr. in Thackston, *The Jahangirnama*, Frontispiece.

Mughal album of portraits (cf. *Ain-i Akbari*, Vol. 1, p. 115).<sup>25</sup> In this respect too, the artist has pushed disruption to a final point of irony.<sup>26</sup> This portrait, uniformly labelled as an imperial portrait, is at the same time a self-portrait, for the artist, Bichitr, places his persona in the same image, at its lowest edge. Here we have the unusual instance of a painter in the strictly regulated system in which this miniature was created, seeking to share the pictorial space of his patron. The framed picture he holds up may be read as a reference to his art<sup>27</sup>, both as creation and at the same time as a salaried activity: an elephant stood for a reward and the salary of painters like that of all other employees in the service of the Mughal court was calculated in terms of foot soldiers (*sawar*). Vision then comes to rest on a mundane transaction between artist and patron for painted mythologies. A central prerequisite of viewing as a sacral vision, as *darshan*, was the invisibility of the artist, the effacing of all traces of his painterly activity. By making his presence visible, the artist transforms vision into an act of representation. He introduces a note of ontological uncertainty, playing ironically as he does on issues of artifice and representation, ideal and reality, the transient body and eternal fame.

### Ordering nature

The subject of death in a sense brings us back to the primordial earth, the third element in the body-kingdom-land triad. Here again, various strains of thinking were present within a culturally diverse court. Like the body, the land too, in various ethical, agronomic and political doctrines, was governed by different humours, which kingdoms and communities had to keep in equilibrium: the soil could be toned up by planting trees and crops, and by digging wells. Equally, the settlement of learned men and great saints could implant virtue in the land (cf. BAYLY 1998, p. 16). Many martial traditions of the subcontinent venerated the land as that for which the sons of the soil sacrificed their lives. For instance mortally wounded Rajputs mixed their blood with the land to form a ball of clay, or food made from the produce of the land, which they offered to ancestors who had conquered and husbanded the land before they did.<sup>28</sup> An ecological harmony between the body and nature—the plant and animal world—was therefore as necessary to a healthy body politic, as was balancing different types and groups of people in a polity. While nature was perceived as a source of life and beauty, it was at the same time feared to be potentially inimical and destructive if left uncontrolled. “Civilising” nature through laying down formal gardens, orchards, through building activity, were all canonised in texts and practice of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as acts of piety. Akbar’s historians describe the

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25 For an extensive discussion of the death image as the true vanishing point of every picture, BELTING 2001, chapters 5 and 6.

26 For a more extensive discussion of other disjunctures that operate within this image, JUNEJA 2002.

27 On the recurrence of this topos in Mughal self portraits, JUNEJA 2008, p. 201.

28 Norman Ziegler, cited in BAYLY 1998, pp. 11f..

transformation of the countryside around the village of Sikri during the course of construction activities to create a new township in the following terms:

The lands which were desolate like the hearts of lovers ... attained freshness, purity, splendour and value like the cheeks of the beautiful ... in the environs which had formerly been the habitat of rabbits and jackals ... mosques, bazaars, baths, caravanserais and other fine buildings were constructed... (*Tarikh-i Akbari*, p. 35)

In artistic representations an important aesthetic value was accorded to the principles of formal linear harmony and symmetry through which human agency would impose its own order and stylisation on nature, so as to draw out its beauty and to intensify the experience and enjoyment of it by those privileged to do so.

The Mughal emperors spent considerable portions of their lives, during their frequent journeys, military and hunting expeditions, in direct contact with nature. This provided the occasion for pictorial narratives to work their way through different idioms that would communicate the idea of a fine ecological balance between the imperial body and the land. The intrinsic presence of violence and mutually hostile forces within nature, a continuing struggle for power and survival, was a continual theme privileged by artists—a favourite topos was the portrayal of powerful animals devouring the weaker ones. The motif of a lion killing a gazelle, or a rabbit, or a bird or a bull or at times even a human being was a recurring one. Intervention in this struggle involved domestication of threatening forces and an imposition of order, balance and harmony through curbing nature's unruliness. Once domesticated, animals come to acquire humanised expressive qualities, serve as a metaphor for perfect justice *adl.*<sup>29</sup>

The subject of the hunt, a favourite of Mughal artists, centred on some of these issues, though pictorial practice did register shifts here while trying to accommodate different understandings of the hunt.<sup>30</sup> Many different meanings and functions have been ascribed to the hunt in north Indian political culture; alone in Mughal texts the list valorising the hunt beyond being simply a favourite royal pastime is a long one, and visual representations moved over time between privileging one or the other. In many parts of early modern Asia hunting was endowed with special significance as an attribute of rulership. François Bernier, the French traveller to Mughal India in the seventeenth century, described a successful hunt as being a "favourable omen," as the escape of an animal was a portent of "infinite evil to the state" (cf. BERNIER 1992, p. 379). Among the Hindu kings of early medieval India, the ritual of enthronement (*rajyabhiseka*), the placement of

29 For instance the miniature from the Polier Album (Staatsbibliothek, Preußischer Kulturbesitz Berlin), showing Jahangir and a lion with his Vizier, repr. in ROGERS 1993, plate 79, p. 113; or observe the rendering of the lion and the ox in the miniature from the Windsor *Padshahnama*, wherein Jahangir presents Prince Khurram with a turban ornament, painted by Payag, c. 1640, repr. in MILO/KOCH/THACKSTON 1997, Plate 39 and Fig. 31 (detail). A number of similar examples exist.

30 On the theme of the hunt in Mughal painting: SKELTON 1969, pp. 33-48; SMART 1979, pp. 396-400; OKADA 1992, pp. 319-327; KOCH 1998.

the imperial body at the sacral centre of the kingdom, was enacted with the throne set over five skins of hunted animals, those of a wolf, a civet, a leopard, a lion and a tiger (cf. INDEN 1998, p. 74). In the double page miniature portraying a hunting scene from the *Akbarnama* discussed earlier in this essay, the artists Miskin and Mansur focus primarily on the bodily relationships between the hunting emperor, the hundreds of beaters, torch bearers and other helpers, and an equally large number of animals, all contained within a composition which locks man and nature within swirling movements. Yet the image also contains a clear ideological reference to the virtue of *adl*, justice: its upper right hand edge makes space within the hunting enclosure for an incident that had taken place previously and was described in the *Akbarnama* (Vol. 2, pp. 417f.). A certain Hamid Bakari had committed an offence against a court official. The punishment meted to him is part of this image, symbolically the site of justice: the culprit is shown, head shaved off, mounted on an ass and being taken around the hunting area as an act of public humiliation. Hunting in this sense has been described as a form of bodily action that brought the emperor regularly to far flung regions of his empire, enabled him to keep an eye on his subjects, and gain knowledge about their condition (cf. *Akbarnama*, Vol. 2, pp. 417f.; KOCH 1998, p. 12). The relationship between bodily action and spiritual purpose is articulated through images in which Akbar is portrayed as experiencing a moment of mystical communion and enlightenment in the midst of a hunt.<sup>31</sup> This was followed by a resolution, Abu'l Fazl informs us, not only to restrain his hunting activities, but also to impose bodily restrictions on himself through consuming a vegetarian diet once a week (cf. *Akbarnama*, vol. 2, pp. 522f.). Images of the hunt from the mid-seventeenth century shift to a more contained, or resolved, idiom which resorts to increased naturalism to locate the physical imperial presence within the heart of nature, in greater harmony with the land and its flora and fauna, as in a painting from the Windsor *Badshahnama*.<sup>32</sup> Embedded in the receding image, is a scene of a peasant working on the land, while another draws water from a well. Their distant bodies merge with nature and the colours of the earth, conveying an unmistakable message of harmony and resolution, effected by an imperial power in perfect control over a realm that encompasses the land, its plant and animal life and the bodies of the subjects that work it.

The variety of pictorial experiments to create images that worked as both *of* the body and those which stand *for* the body, had the power to function across regional identities in more than one way: they shaped a language that could generate cohesion among multi-ethnic and pluri-religious imperial elites in north India during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and could equally be reappropriated

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31 Miniature from the Victoria and Albert Museum *Akbarnama*, by Mahesh (composition and modelling) and Kesu (faces) which portrays Akbar experiencing a spiritual seizure in the midst of a hunting expedition in the desert, reproduced in SEN 1984, plate 60, p. 136.

32 Shah Jahan hunting (c. 1645), repr. in BEACH/KOCH/THACKSTON 1997, plate 33, p. 85 and fig. 62 (detail), p. 155.

by these to define anew the boundaries between the empire and the regions. This dynamic accelerated with the transition to the eighteenth century, a time marked by imperial disintegration and the emergence of new political formations, courtly and market cultures, processes which have all been competently analysed by historians over the past decades. These years were also a time of cultural shifts, when court artists sought employment with new patrons espousing different forms of political and bodily cultures—the Marathas, Sikhs, the Deccani elites, now joined by the trading officials of the East India Company. Examining the ways in which visual culture participated and constituted the historical fortunes of these decades promises to be an exciting and rewarding undertaking.

### List of illustrations



Figs. 1-2: Akbar engaged in a hunt near Lahore, double page miniature from the *Akbarnama*, painted by Miskin and Mansur, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Fig. 3: Mughal Prince offering wine to his mistress (c. 1740), San Diego Museum of Art



Figs 4-5: Construction workers at the Agra Fort, double page miniature from the *Akbarnama*, painted by Miskin, Sarwan and Tulsi Khurd, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

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