

INTER-PICTORIAL ENCOUNTER: JESUITS BIBLICAL ART AND INDIAN MINIATURE PAINTING

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The cover page shows Mughal Emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605) holds a religious assembly in the *Ibadat Khana* (House of Worship) in Fatehpur Sikri; the two men dressed in black are the Jesuit missionaries Rodolfo Acquaviva and Francisco Henriques. Illustration of the *Akbarnama*, miniature painting by Nar Singh, ca. 1605.

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The Mughal painting [...] showed that it was still possible to found a new art on the basis of the old traditions: foreign influences were, not perhaps easily, but at last effectually, assimilated, and the result was a new and great art, which [...] is truly original.

*Anand K. Commaraswamy*¹

The Mughal art came across European paintings, prints, engravings and other decorative arts in early 1570s². One of the member of first Jesuit mission to the Mughal court (1580-1583), Anthony Monserrate noted the presence of European art on the wall of royal dining-hall at their arrival in Fatehpur sikri³. It is believed that the first European paintings that reached Akbar's court were large oil paintings of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary was a known figure in Akbar's court. She is the only woman mentioned by name in the Qur'an, and Akbar's mother was named Maryam, the Arabic form of the name Mary. This mission had presented a copy of Jesuits' Bible to Akbar that was Plantyn's Royal Polyglot Bible with illustration done by some Flemish painter of the school of Quintin Matsys (1466-1530) and P. Huys. It is reported that when Akbar received this Bible, *«he held them in his hands and publicly kissed them, and placed them on his head...»*. A Jesuit priest observed Akbar's behaviour in following words: *removing his cap or turban, kneeling on the ground with great devotion, he prayed before the picture of Christ and of the Virgin, venerating thrice, once in our manner, the other in that of the Muslims and the third in the Hindu fashion, that is to say, prostrate, saying that God should be adored with every form of adoration*⁴. This Jesuit mission had also introduced some western paintings of post-renaissance period, especially Flemish art of Antwerp school and the work of Johann Sadeler

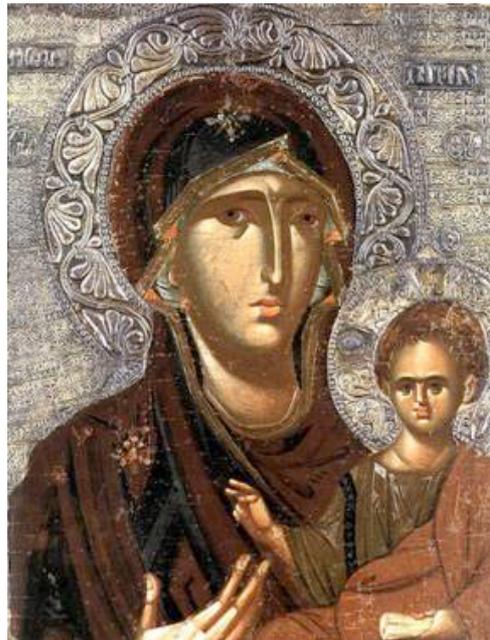
¹ Coomaraswamy, 1994, pp. 79-80.

² The first wave of European prints dating from the 1540s must have arrived with Francis Xavier who was sent to India in 1542, or subsequently with fifty of his Jesuit brothers who joined him in Goa after 1555. Some of these mid-sixteenth century prints were probably acquired by the Mughal embassy to Goa in 1575. The second wave, dating from the latter part of the century must have arrived at the Mughal court with the three Jesuit missions, the first in 1580, the second in 1591, and the third in 1595.

³ Correia-Alfonso, 1980, p. 76.

⁴ MacLagan, 1932, pp. 227-228.

(1550-1600), Hieronymus Wierix (1553-1619), Raphael Sadeler (1555-1618) and Theodor Galle (1571-1633) —these were



Madonna and infant Jesus
Mughal

(<http://www.tribuneindia.com/2005/20051225/spectrum/main2.htm>)

subsequently copied and adapted in Mughal miniature paintings and murals by the court artists of Akbar (r. 1556-1605), and later Jahangir (r. 1605-1627) and Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1657) at Fatehpur Sikri, Agra, Lahore and Delhi. In 1580, Akbar allowed Portuguese Jesuit priests from Goa to set up a chapel in his palace; there they exhibited two paintings of the Madonna and Child before a large and excited crowd.

Douglas Galbi in his work, «Sense in Communication» describes this event in following words: «This one was a copy of the Madonna del Popolo, a *hodigitria* that Pope Gregory IX presented to a church

in Rome in 1231. Ten thousand persons came in one day in 1602 to see the painting. A great captain, «accompanied by more than sixty men on horseback», came to see the painting. Although he had already seen other *hodigitria*, Akbar asked that the painting be brought to him. He kept it overnight in his «sleeping apartment», where his wives and children lived. Soon thereafter Akbar's mother requested that the painting be brought to her, and so did other socially and politically important persons. The painting became a crowd attraction and a performance piece⁵. Du Jarrics describes this incidence in this way: «*A great crowd of people had assembled in the palace yard in the hope of being able to see the picture [...] seeing that they would be able to satisfy so large a number of persons at one time, [the Jesuit priests] placed it where all could see it and publicly uncovered it. The moment it was exposed to view, the noise and clamor of the crowded courtyard was hushed as if by magic, and the people gazed on the picture in unbroken silence*»⁶. Subsequent Portuguese clerics found that the gospel books brought by their predecessors had led to murals of Christ, his mother and the Christian saints being painted on the walls not only of the palace but also on Mughal tombs and caravanserais: «[The emperor] has painted images of Christ our Lord and our Lady in various places in the palace», wrote one Jesuit father, «and there are so many saints that [...] you would say it was more like the palace of a Christian king than a Moorish one»⁷.

The Jesuit Priests presented to the Mughal court not only Christian paintings but some non-religious works like portraits of nobility, landscapes, woodcuts, silk and woolen tapestries, illustrated books, etc. Later, Flemish copper engravings were also introduced —it affected the current painting:

⁵ www.galbithink.org

⁶ du Jarric, 1979, p. 168.

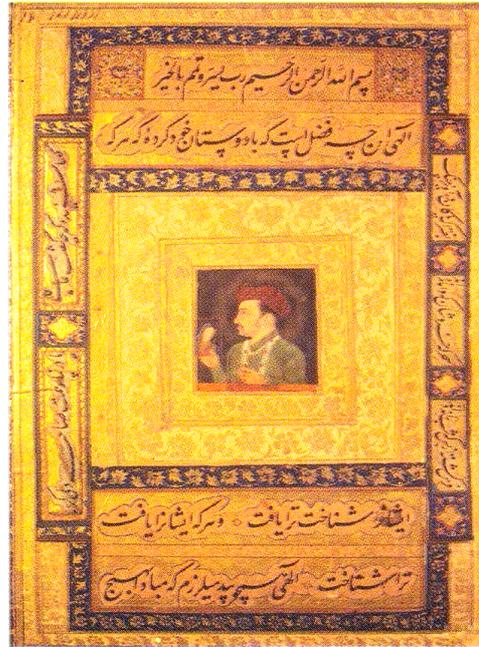
⁷ <http://www.newstatesman.com/200512190021>



An European in Mughal India, ca. 1590

(<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O17478/watercolour-portrait-of-a-european/>)

Scenario of the Imperial Studio mainly in two ways: firstly some European painting and person found their ways directly into their canvas along with some biblical themes and secondly their style of presentation somehow changed. There are few paintings where European paintings are shown hung on the wall of the depicted palace and in some work European characters are independently delineated.



Jahangir holding the picture of Madonna,
 ca. 1620 A.D., National Museum, New Delhi

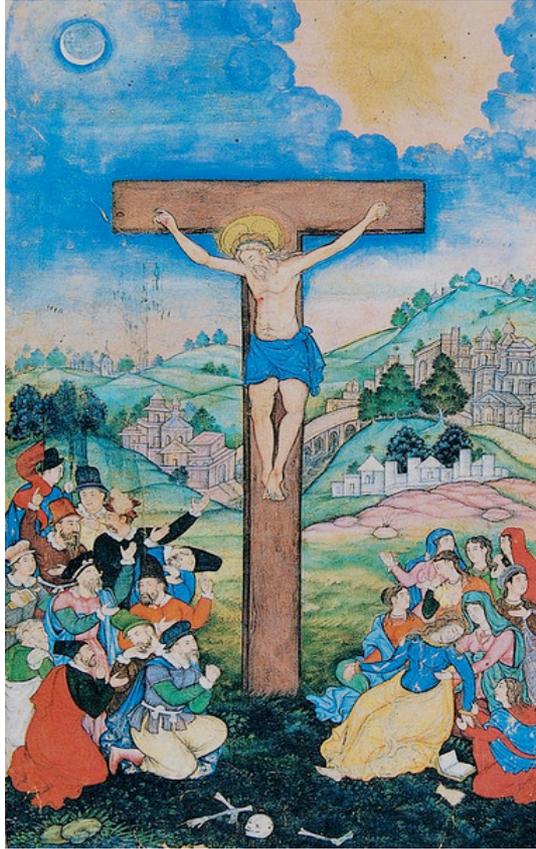
It is said that when Indian artists made copies and adapted versions of the western paintings, prints and engravings their subject-matter and the very grammar of their art gradually started changing. Not only Scenes from the life of Christ like Nativity, Adoration of Magi, Flight to Egypt, Crucifixion, Deposition, Christ and the Apostles, and Christian saints, The Madonna and Child and Virgin Mary, European type winged angels or cherubs playing musical instruments, became popular subjects of their canvases and murals but the very prominent Mughal artists like Kesu Das, Basawan, Govardhan, Payag, Bichitra and Abu ul Hasan etc had started giving the prominence in their oeuvres, of never tested before aerial perspective and modeling, spatial depth and chiaroscuro effect, use of full faces and frontal poses, subdued colour of hazy landscapes and overall a kind of humanist approach. *The Madonna and Child* and *Virgin Mary* were

very popular subjects in the Mughal court. A Madonna and Child by Kesu shows a very Baroque treatment of drapery and the tree. Scenes from the life of Christ like Nativity, Adoration of Magi, flight to Egypt, Crucifixion, deposition, Christ and the apostles, and Christian saints were depicted not only in the Mughal miniatures but also in the royal palaces. One scholar notes:

European visitors to the palaces and tombs of the emperors of Mughal India («Mogor» in Portugese) between the 1590s and 1660s were amazed to find them prominently adorned with mural paintings depicting Christ, the Virgin Mary, and Christian saints executed in the style of the Late Renaissance. To their astonishment, they also discovered Mughal artists at work on large numbers of miniature paintings, exquisite jewelry, and sculptures of the same subjects—including many which were apparently even being used as devotional images⁸.

Mirat ul Quds (The Mirror of Holiness), one of the most precious illuminated manuscripts of Lahore Museum and a masterpiece of Akbar's time, consists eleven miniatures depicting the life of Christ in the Mughal mannerism with an influence of European traditions and Christian Symbolism.

⁸ Bailey, 1999, p. 112.

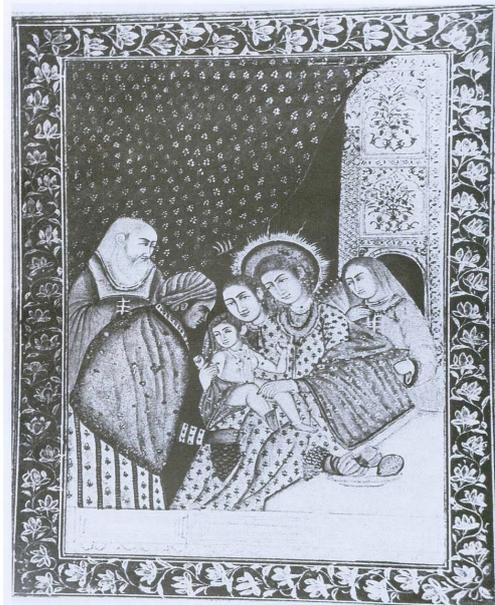


Crucifixion. By Keshu Das

(<http://www.flickr.com/photos/22955235@N00/1239254680/in/set-72157600028124617>)



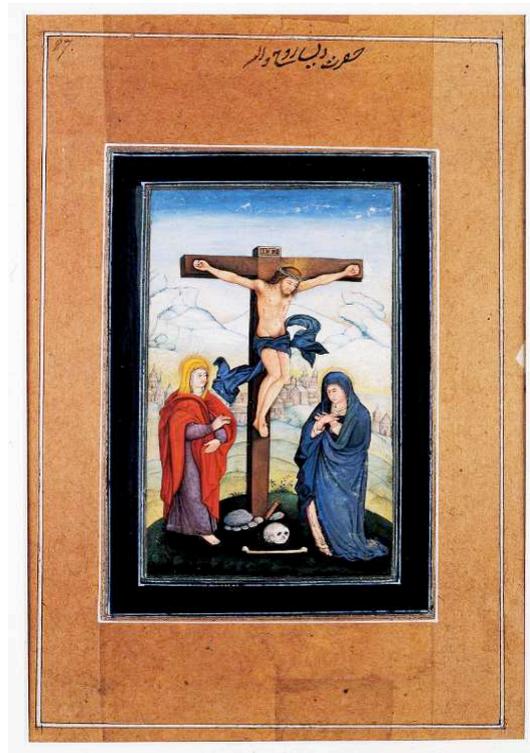
The last Supper, School of Shah Jahan,
Bharat Kala Bhavan, Banaras, Acc, no, 690 M



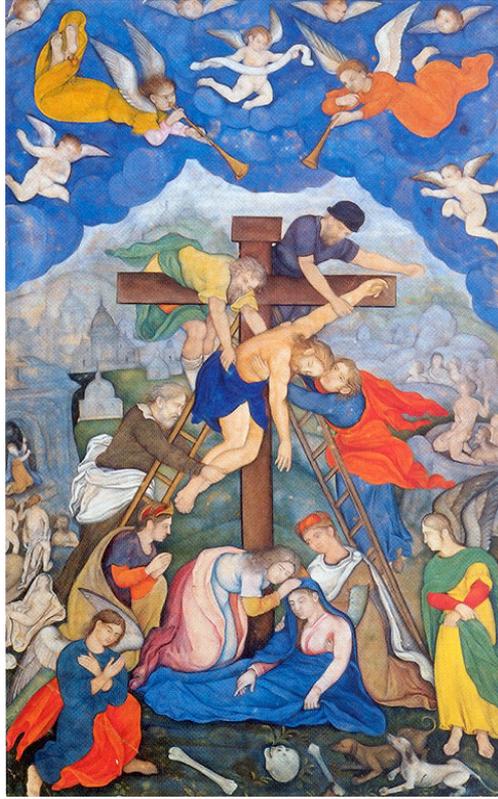
III. 98
"The Birth of Christ",
c. 1775,
National Museum,
New Delhi (no. 58.20/281).



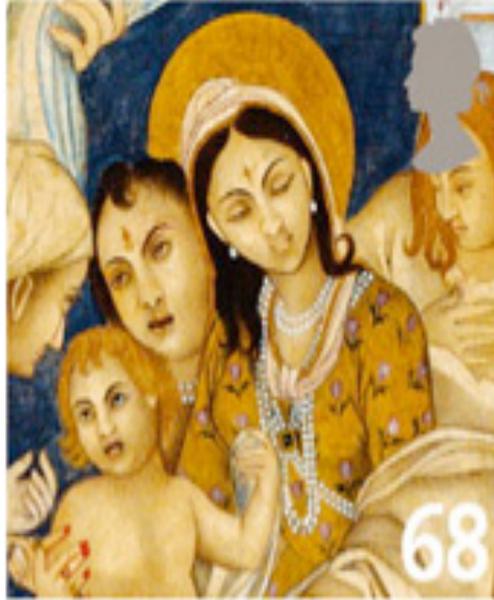
Adam, c. first half of the 17th century,
Chester Beatty Library, Dublin
(http://www.cbl.ie/cbl_image_gallery/collection/list.aspx?collectionId=2)



A crucifixion, with the Virgin and Saint Anne, from Akbar's court, c.1600; in the collection of the Aga Khan Museum (http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/1500_1599/akbar/europeanart/europeanart.html)



The Deposition from the Cross, Unknown, c.1598, Mughal, Watercolour, Gold, ink on paper, Victoria and Albert Museum, London
(<http://www.conniemadson.com/artmovements/09%20islamic%20and%20mughal%20art.html>)



Madonna with Infant Jesus

Unattributed, 17th century, Mughal, Prince of Wales Museum of
Western India

(http://www.chapatimystery.com/archives/homistan/postcolonial_skins.html)



*Madonna and Christ, ca. 18th Century,
Pahadi style*

(http://www.mullocksauctions.co.uk/lot-41541-india_%E2%80%93_mughal_painting_of_christ_c18th_century.html)

The exposure to European artistic traditions began to blend in with the Mughal style and typical miniature repertoire of court scenes, portraits of royalty, hunting parties and musical soirees were started changing. European characteristics like aerial perspective, spatial depth, chiaroscuro effect, use of full faces, frontal poses, subdued colour and overall so called humanist approach were very much evident in the work of prominent Mughal artists like Kesu Das, Basawan, Govardhan, Payag, Bichitr and Abu ul Hasan etc. Their portraits of dervishes, Sufis and philosophers need special mention in this regard. It is also worth noting the fact what Som Prakash Verma formulates: «The Mughal artist, under the influence of Renaissance humanist movement in art added a new chapter in Indian art which is neither a direct continuation of the pre-Islamic Indian traditions and nor explicitly Persian. The Mughal painting, eclectic in

character, evolved with the interaction of various traditions, predominantly Indian Persian and European. The context of naturalism, scientific perspective, and chiaroscuro—contrasts in light and shade in Mughal painting is the gift of humanism as practiced by the European artists of Renaissance»⁹.

One of the most prominent painters of Akbar's atelier and also one of the Jahangir's favourite early artists was Kesu Das. He is well known for his highly skilled copies of European engravings; especially of Minerva, St Jerome¹⁰, the story of Joseph¹¹, St. Matthew and the angel & Crucifixion¹². As it was pointed out by one critic». His picture *St Mathew and the angel*, executed in 1587-8, was based on a print of an engraving by Philip Galle after Martin van Heemskrek *St Mathew the Evangelist* and is almost European in character. In his copy, the Mughal painter has successfully delineated the folds in the robes of the saint and the facial expression in his figure. Kesavdas's picture *Joseph telling his dream to his father* (ca. 1600), based on an engraving by George Pencz, dated 1544, is another outstanding Mughal copy of a European work revealing the artist's full control on European technique and style. In his picture of St Jerome adopted from Mario Cartaro's print of an engraving of Michelangelo's Noah from Sistine chapel, Kesavdas's understanding of the subject is explicit in the rendering of the muscular modeling close to the style of Michelangelo. Bailey observes that Kesavdas has excelled here. In fact, the pulsating flesh of his image is more Michelangelesque than the Italian engraving he copied»¹³.

⁹ Prakash Verma, 2011, p. 103.

¹⁰ See Okada, 1992, pl. 100, p. 97.

¹¹ Beach, 1978.

¹² See Rogers, 1993.

¹³ Prakash Verma, 2011, p. 114.



St. Matthew and the angel, Kesu Das
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Matthew)



Minerva, Kesu Das

(http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/1500_1599/akbar/europeanart/europeanart.html)

Besides Kesu Basawan was another insightful painter of his time and his skill and independence in copying European engravings and Christian iconography is very clear in two drawings published in *Imperial Mughal Painters*¹⁴. Basawan's *Minerva* is quite different from the original in some radical way. The treatment of the young

¹⁴ Okada, 1992, 89-90, p. 89.

woman's cloak, which rises above her shoulder and her hand position, is depicted very different from the original¹⁵.



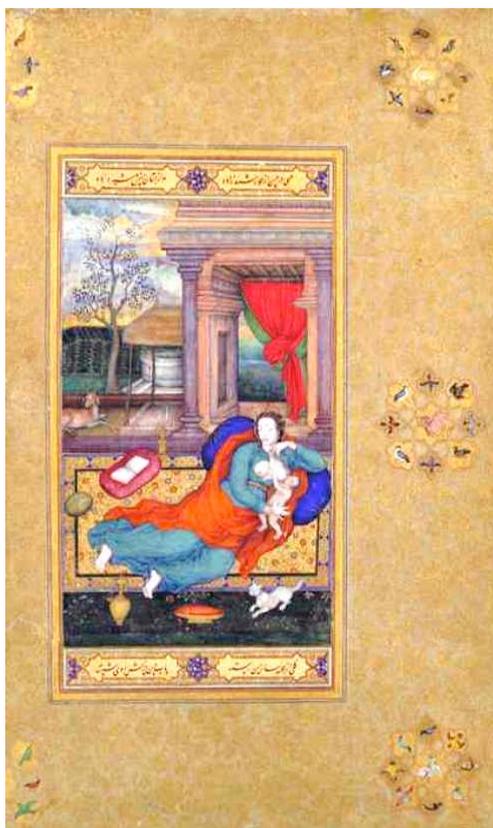
Minerva

Basawan, *ca.*1600

(http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/1500_1599/akbar/europeanart/europeanart.html)

¹⁵ An European-style Minerva stands on a pedestal, holding a string instrument and chain, confronted by a baby and surrounded by various articles including a book and an ewer, a later inscription to the bottom of the drawing reads Ustad Basawan or «Master Basawan», laid down with pale green and pink margins illuminated with gold flowers and gold, red and blue margins with blue rule on blue tinted paper, with gold wildlife on a leafy ground, a short note below, lower margin an inscription contemporary with the signature, verso with four diagonal lines of flowing nasta'liq signed Muhammad Husayn [Zarrin Qalam] similarly margined, ruled and mounted, small localized areas of repair. Miniature 7 x 3½in. (17.8 x 8.9 cm); Folio 14½ x 9 3/8in. (36.8 x 23.8 cm). A note in the lower margin, presumably intended for the binder, translates 'Facing the [painting] of the woman holding a baby in her arm'. Minerva. Mughal India, Drawing ascribed to Basawan, Calligraphy by Muhammad Husayn Zarrin Qalam, *ca.* 1600. Album leaf, brush drawing on paper.

Traditionally Minerva is shown with a spear in her hand but Basawan portrays her with a string instrument, perhaps Rabab or veena in her hand but as in original she is shown here also standing in front of books. It is rightly emphasized that «In the context of the rendering of symbolic images, Basawan, a prolific painter of Akbar's court, was the foremost.



The Virgin and Child, Basawan, Mughal, around 1590.

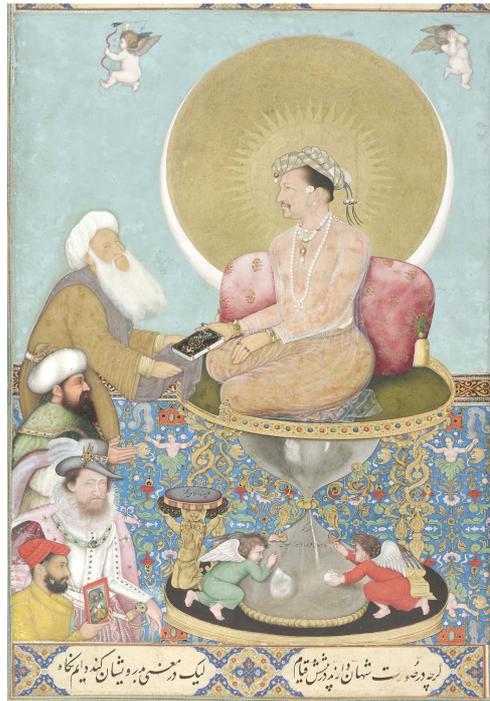
Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. 16 x 10 inches (40 x 24.7 cm).

Edward Binney 3rd Collection

(http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/1500_1599/akbar/europeanart/europeanart.html)

He showed a fascination for European emblematic picture/figures, and exhibited considerable ingenuity in their adaptation

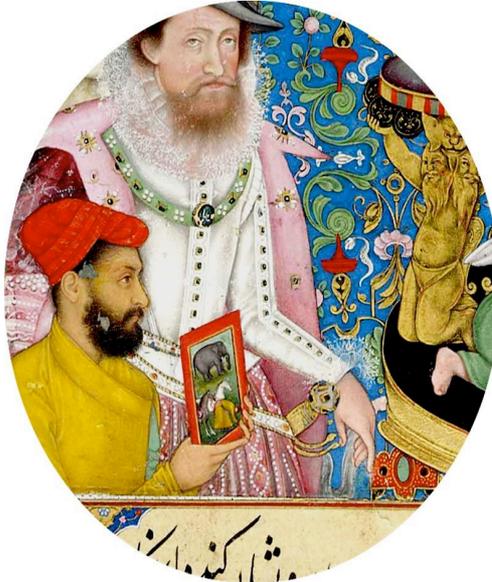
by introducing some alterations suitable to the taste of the Mughal court»¹⁶.



Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings

Bichitr (act. 1615–50) India, Mughal period. Opaque watercolor, gold, and ink on paper. Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C. (<http://resobscura.blogspot.com/2011/02/jahangirs-turkey-early-modern.html>)

¹⁶ Prakash Verma, 2011, p. 109.



Detail from a watercolor painting created in 1618. By Bichitr for the Mughal emperor Jahangir (1569-1627). Here we find the strange juxtaposition of James I and VI of England (1566-1625) (<http://resobscura.blogspot.com/2011/02/jahangirs-turkey-early-modern.html>)

This Mughal painting evidences a European influence, as illustrated in the naked cupids and the image of King James I of England, with the haloed emperor sitting on an hourglass throne. It depicts the ruler as favoring spiritual power over worldly power and moreover to hallow him artist tried to give him some kind of metaphysical authority. It is also to be noted that



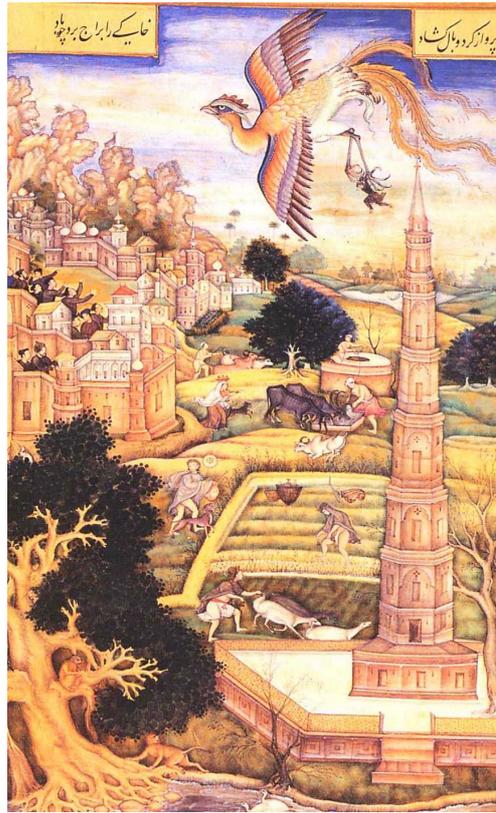
Emperor Jahangir,

Bichitr, *Triumphant Over Poverty*, ca. 1620-1625

(<http://collectionsonline.lacma.org/mwebcgi/mweb.exe?request=record;id=37429;type=101>)

the symbolic representation of God in human form in the Mughal School is almost certainly derived from European pictures connected with the episode of Crucifixion, where God's portrayal in a full-fledged human form emerged during the fifteenth century. An application of this European symbol in the delineation of the emblematic pictures of the Mughal emperors is significant, since it suggests their own link with divinity. Undoubtedly, the representation of God in human form in imperial Mughal painting was a bold step by the artists. We know that in

Islamic paintings, there is always a restraint in this regard, albeit without any inhibition in case of the portrayal of the prophets. The application of European symbols, namely, the halo, angels, cherubs, and God the father in Mughal portraits added an air of spirituality to the picture...¹⁷.



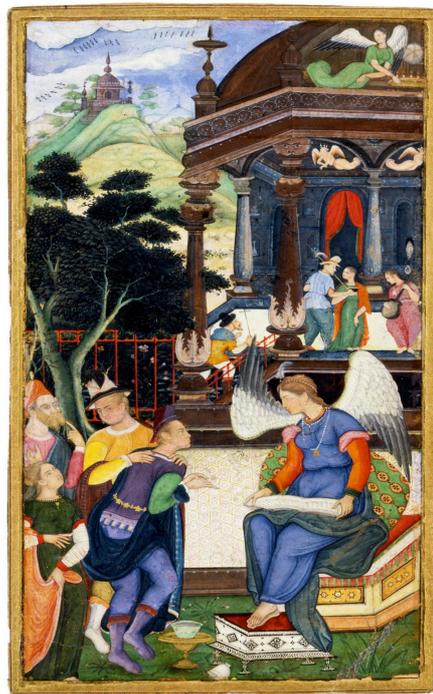
The King Carried Away by a Giant Bird – The Story of the Princess of the Black Pavilion, by Dharmdasa

From the Khamsa of Nizami, Painting on paper
British Library Or. 12, 208, 1593-95, 30 x 19.5 cm
(<http://asianart.com/articles/minissale/5.html>)

The influence of European technique of painting is also very much evident in the use of stereoscopic perspective and *Sfumato* and

¹⁷ Prakash Verma, 2011, p. 109.

this is certainly a decisive break with the earlier techniques of Persian painting where figures near the horizon differ little in size from those in the foreground and where objects appear stacked, one upon another.

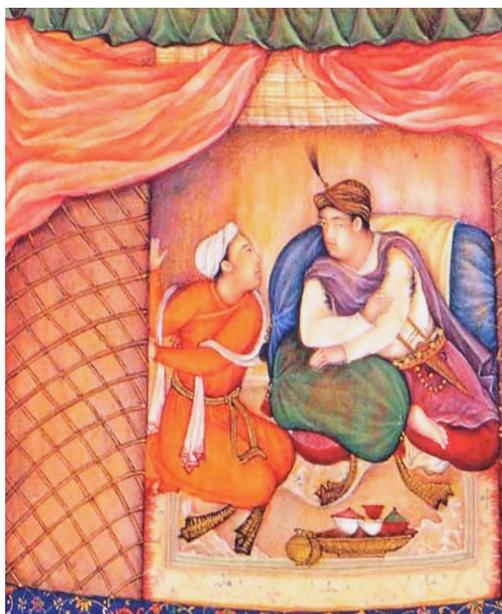


An Angel Conversing with a Group of Europeans
Mughal; ca. 1610.

Miniature: 17.9 x 9.5 cm

(<http://www.davidmus.dk/en/collections/islamic/materials/miniatures/art/6-1981>)

In this curious miniature, which is a free paraphrase of an engraving by the German artist Georg Pencz, the Indian artist endeavored to render the domed building with linear perspective, without much success. However he did a better job at using aerial perspective, in which the intensity of the colors decreases as distance increases.



Shapur Brings Khusrau News of Shirin
Dharmdasa

From the Khamsa of Nizami, f. 52a

Painting on paper

British Library Or. 12,208 1593-1595, 30 x 19.5 cm

(<http://asianart.com/articles/minissale/4.html>)

Another technique that Mughal painter had imported from European masters is *Sfumato*, that may be defined as the deliberate blurring of a line or contour to make an object seem to disappear in the distance, or to add a soft-focus effect to a face or body in the foreground. In the *Khamsa*, this technique is used in conjunction with another technique, that of painting distant landscape in pale blue in order to create the appearance of distance through gradual shifts of colour from dark to pale tones towards the horizon. Many of the engravings found in Mughal possession excel in the technique of modeling – using light and dark tones to depict the direction of light in order to conjure up the illusion of three dimensions. This is seen best in the modeling of cloth. European engravings provided clear models of the principle of establishing the direction of light. Al-

though there are several examples of Mughal artists rendering the light and shade of folds of cloth in the *Khamasa* manuscript, the most impressive study appears in *Shapur Brings Khusrau News of shirin* here, the curtains of the tent show the Mughal artist's masterful use of the European technique of modeling and a new interest in using colours to depict light and shade, rather than solely as areas in an overall chromatic structure¹⁸.

Since Indian miniature painting had a long and living tradition of assimilating different streams of conventions related with Jains, Buddhists, Rajputs and Persian origins; the new element of European traditions also got assimilated with passing of times. The eclectic tastes of the Mughal rulers also played a crucial role as it gave rise to the use of various sources for artistic persuasions among the court painters. Alongside illustrations of a few classics of Iranian literature, they also encouraged or commissioned the copying of great illustrated works of Indian culture like of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. No wonder they were very proud and possessive about their artists and their patronage were extended to them across the cast, creed or religion. It is clearly reflected in the off quoted incidence of Thomas Roe with Jahangir «a picture of a friend of mine that I esteemed very much, and was for curiosity rare, which I would give His Majesty as a present». When the moment for making the presentation finally came, the Emperor «took extreme content, showing it to every man near him: at last sent for his chief painter, demanding his opinion. The fool answered he could make as good, whereat the King turned to me, saying my man sayeth he can do the like and as well as this: what vow?» A wager was set, the painting handed over to the imperial painter, and on the day appointed the King sent for me, being hasty to triumph in his workman, and showed me six pictures, five made by his man, all pasted on one table, so like that I was by candle light troubled to discern which was which «for that at first sight I knew it not, he [the Emperor] was very merry and joyful and cracked like a northern man»¹⁹.

Recent scholarship tries to explain Mughal-Christian intercultural relations with culturally specific representations and narratives. This

¹⁸ Minissale, *The Synthesis of European and Mughal Art in the Emperor Akbar's Khamasa of Nizami*, <http://www.asianart.com/articles/minissale/>

¹⁹ Foster, 1990.

scholarship analyses interest in Christian imagery as a matter of appropriating representations:

They interpreted missionary art on their own terms and used images of Christian saints and angels to proclaim a message based on Islamic, Sufi, and Hindu symbolism and linked with Persian poetic metaphor.

[...] Far from being alien to Indo-Islamic culture, these figures carried a rich range of associations for their Mughal audience and communicated messages related to moral leadership, divine guidance, and royal genealogy. Contemporary texts show that Mughal panegyrists openly alluded to both figures in prose and poetry to promote their leaders' rights to rule. It naturally follows that Mughal artists encoded the same meaning into portraits of these holy figures²⁰.

But it may be perceived in different way also as it was argued that,

it is hard to say to what degree catholic thought influenced the Mughal's own attitudes to the figural arts, but since the two cultures already shared similar horizons of expectation due to ideas that derived from a common Neoplatonic cultural heritage, it was probably more a case of concurrence than influence²¹.

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²⁰ Bailey, 1998, p. 37.

²¹ Bailey, 1998, p. 26.

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