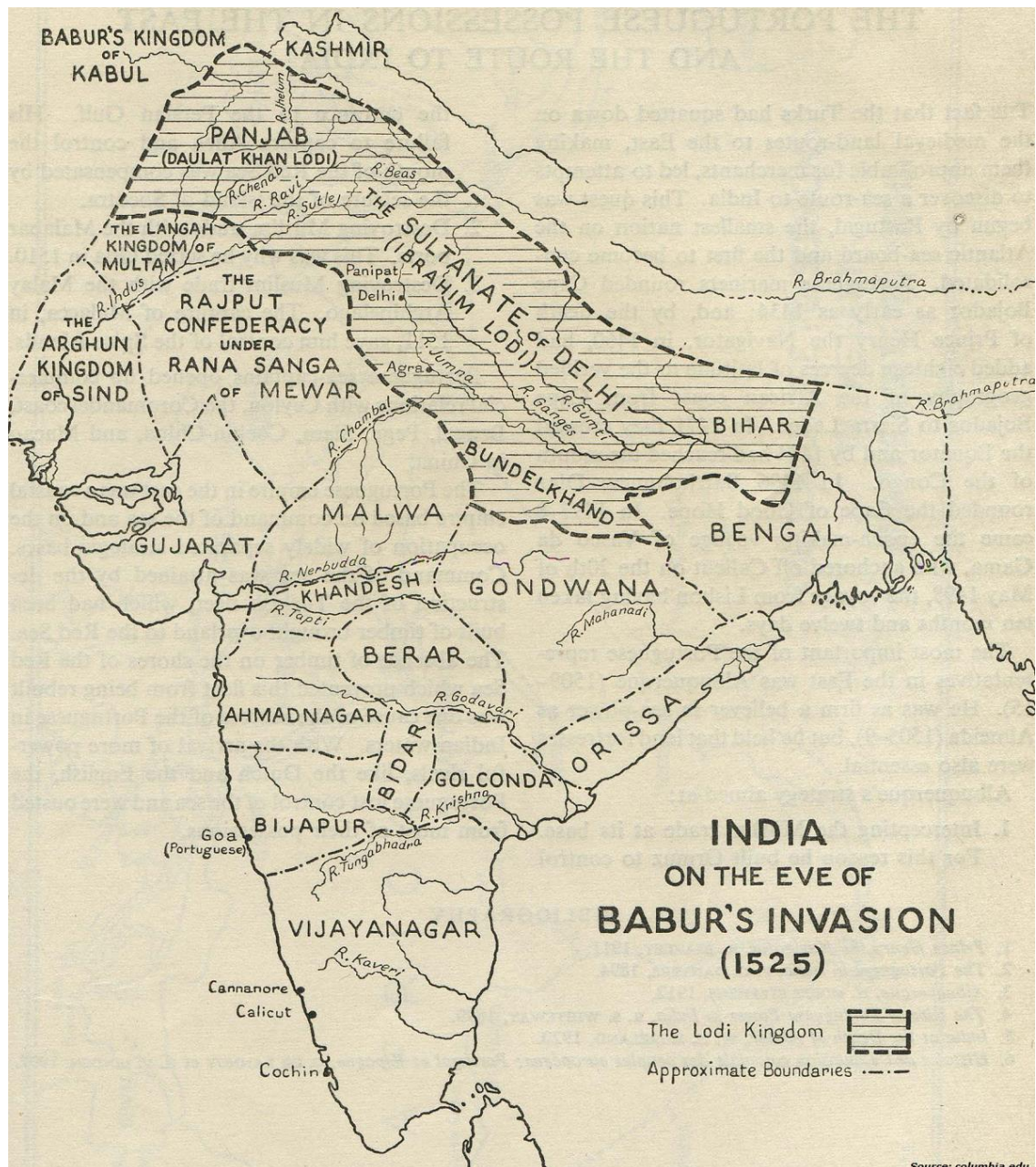


EVOLUTION OF THE MUGHAL EMPIRE THROUGH MINIATURE PAINTINGS.

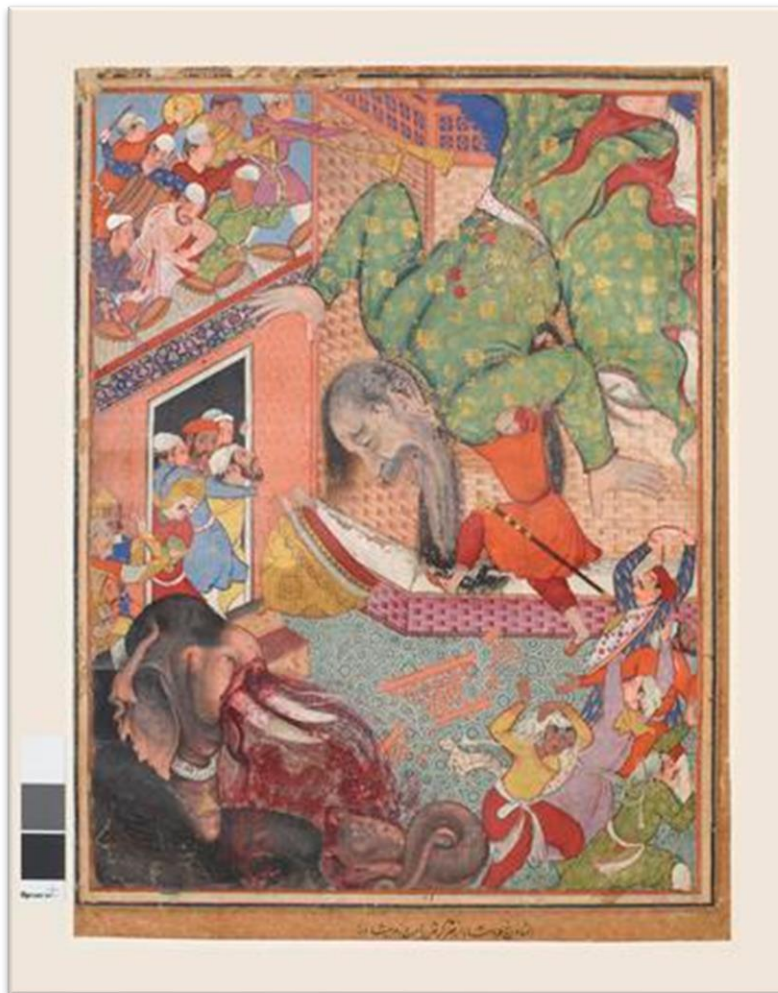
Above the elephant leaps a hero about to hurl the villain to his death, surrounded by celebrating musicians and bystanders scrambling to get out of the way. Intricate architectural details and an elaborately tiled floor provide a busy backdrop to the chaos. This odd scene, violent and gorgeous, is one of 1,400 illustrations from a manuscript of an epic tale commissioned by the Mughal emperor Akbar.

Suryansh Dalmia

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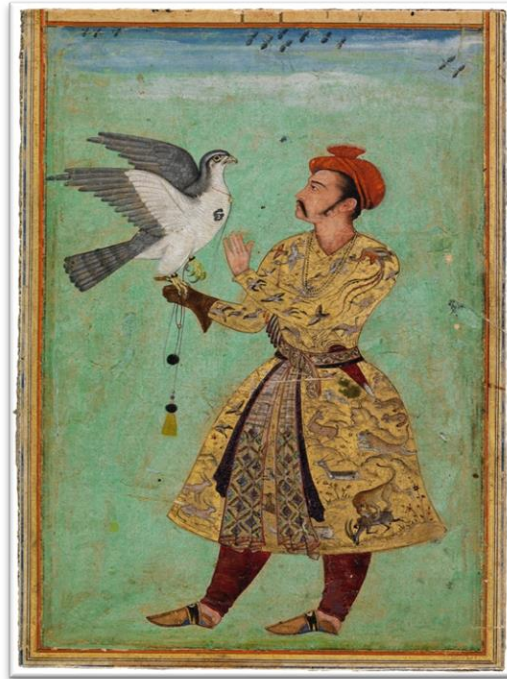
A bloodied and mutilated elephant fills the bottom left of the Mughal miniature *Fall of the Giant* (1564–79), its writhing trunk and dappled skin portrayed in painful, exquisite detail. Above the elephant leaps a hero about to hurl the villain to his death, surrounded by celebrating musicians and bystanders scrambling to get out of the way. Intricate architectural details and an elaborately tiled floor provide a busy backdrop to the chaos. This odd scene, violent and gorgeous, is one of 1,400 illustrations from a manuscript of an epic tale commissioned by the Mughal emperor Akbar. It's a powerful example of the miniature painting tradition that thrived under his rule.



Fall of the Giant

Indian miniature painting had existed in various forms since the 9th century, but there was no cohesive vision. Certain styles began to coalesce in the 15th century, but it wasn't until the Mughal Empire was established in 1526 that miniature painting came into its own. Mughal miniatures are a blend of the bold, vivid colours favoured by Indian painters; the fine, delicate lines preferred by Persian painters; and a European influence from artists like Albrecht Dürer, brought to India by Jesuit missionaries. Just like the empire they came from, Mughal miniatures drew from India, Persia, and Europe to create something entirely new.

Mughal miniatures were small (many not more than a few square inches), brightly coloured, and highly detailed paintings mostly used to illustrate manuscripts and art books. Despite their tiny sizes, they are incredibly precise, with some lines painted using brushes composed of a single hair. Prince with a Falcon (1600–05), for instance, is roughly 6 inches tall and 3 inches wide, but manages to trace the titular bird's every feather; the wisps of the prince's hair; and an entire menagerie of fluttering birds and hunting lions decorating his tunic. These miniatures valued colour and extreme detail over shading and realistic perspective, giving figures a static appearance, frozen in positions that emphasize their two-dimensionality.



Prince with a Falcon

It's important to know a bit about the context within which this artistry thrived. Based in northern India during the 16th through 18th centuries, the Mughals ruled as one of the most dominant regimes in Asia. The empire covered most of what is now modern-day India, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and by 1700, it was the most powerful economic force in the world, with about 25 percent of the world's gross domestic product.

Beyond military and economic might, the empire was also a watershed moment for Indian art. Founded in 1526 by Emperor Babur, a descendent of Genghis Khan, the empire was famous for its lavish architecture (the Taj Mahal, for one). It was the Mughal gardens, however, that stole the show: exquisite walled spaces filled with flowers, pools, birds, and shaded walkways.



Navina Najat Haidar, a curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's department of Islamic art, told *Artsy* that the "Mughal aesthetic is very unified, extending from architecture to painting—so painting and gardens are related. Plus, the Mughal love of nature and observation of plants is closely linked to the representation of flora and gardens in painting." Many Mughal gardens are preserved as UNESCO World Heritage sites; UNESCO describes Lahore's Shalimar Gardens as the "apogee of Mughal artistic expression." These gardens figure prominently in the miniature paintings, and both speak to the empire's search for refinement and aesthetic pleasure.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MUGHAL SCHOOL OF PAINTING THROUGH TIME.

UNDER HUMAYUN-

The refinement associated with Mughal miniature paintings was far from immediate. The first few decades of the empire were unstable and chaotic. A 1540 uprising in Afghanistan forced Humāyūn, Babur's son, to flee his court in order to seek military help. He took shelter at the Persian Safavid court in Qazvin, where he experienced Persian painting first hand. He was so enamored with the work that when he finally recaptured his home state in 1555, he brought two Persian painters, Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad, back to India with him. As the story goes, Mir Sayyid Ali had proven his skill by painting a polo match on a grain of rice, complete with goal posts and four horsemen. Hiring the painters was no casual decision. As art historian J.M. Rogers points out in his book on Mughal painting, "Considering Humāyūn's beleaguered state and the unlikelihood of his ever regaining a stable position in India, the employment of two... expensive painters while he was still in exile represented a considerable investment."

These two artists stayed at the court for the rest of their lives, and helped Humāyūn found and run an atelier of over 100 painters. The artists spent their days illustrating manuscripts for Persian love stories and Indian epics like the Mahābhārata, along with scenes of courtly life. *Jahangir weighing Khurram against Gold and Silver* (1615), for example, is an opulent scene showing the emperor's son on his 15th birthday, seated on a scale made of gold and rubies, surrounded by jewels, daggers, and attendants.

UNDER AKBAR AND JAHANGIR

The empire peaked with Humāyūn's son, known as Akbar the Great, who ruled from 1556 to 1605 and devoted an extraordinary amount of time to the arts. Although allegedly illiterate, he filled his court with poets and painters, encouraged intellectual debate, and sponsored ambitious works of architecture. He advocated extraordinary religious tolerance, which brought an unprecedented peace to the empire. Rarely has an empire been so dedicated to

the arts: When Akbar died in 1605, his library of poetry, philosophy, and painting was valued at over three times the amount he spent building the city of Fatehpur Sikri.

Akbar's son and successor, Emperor Jahangir, had an even more single-minded obsession with painting. Rogers describes him as a "visual glutton," recalling an incident when, rather than help a dying man who asked for aid, Jahangir had his painters "take a portrait...[of his] emaciated face." Stories like this underscore the way painting was intimately tied to the court, and, by extension, to the desires of the emperor. It was only through the emphasis and funding provided by Humāyūn and his descendents that court painting in the form of Mughal miniatures came to be seen as the highest form of sophistication and elegance.



Govardhan, Shah Jahan accepts a falcon from Dara Shikoh, 1630. San Diego Museum of Art/Bridgeman Images and the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, Shah Jahan and Dara Shikoh, 1656-1661. Courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum.

Jahangir considered painting to be a form of historical documentation of the wonders of nature and the peculiar and unusual events in everyday life. Such pictures naturally aroused the curiosity, amazement, and pleasures of onlookers. Jahangir's unceasing passion for exotic nature and wildlife prompted a new subject of painting, that is, pictures on natural history. The portrayal of the strange and unfamiliar never ceased to fascinate him. Also, accuracy in the depiction of the details of an object was strictly formalized under the rigour of Jahangir's keen eye. Jahangir craved for detailed and, hence, truthful graphic description of an object, and pictorial narratives with physical reality became the mainstay of painters.

Jahangir, like his father, had portraits painted of his nobles, which were collected together in albums. He had portraits painted of the nobles of the Mughal court as well as of Safavid and Uzbek rulers, princes, and nobles. He sent his painter Bishandas to Iran specially to prepare portraits of the ruler, Shah 'Abbas I, and his nobles. A few portraits of Shah 'Abbas and his courtiers, done by Bishandas

in Iran (1613 – 19), are thus a result of the artist's direct observation. Jahangir was so pleased with Bishandas's achievement that in 1619 he presented him with an elephant, which was a status symbol in Mughal India. He also checked the authenticity of the portraits with those who had seen the person concerned.

UNDER SHAH JAHAN

Under Shah Jahan, portraiture still held pride of place. The likeness of the emperor and the nobles continued to be the key focus of portrait painting. Apotheosis portrait of the emperor, as well as genealogical and equestrian portraits, were the subjects of the artist's attention. In a genealogical painting there is an imaginary setting in which three emperors, Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan, in a group emerged as a typified composition. The portrayal of ascetics and saints was another area of artistic interest.

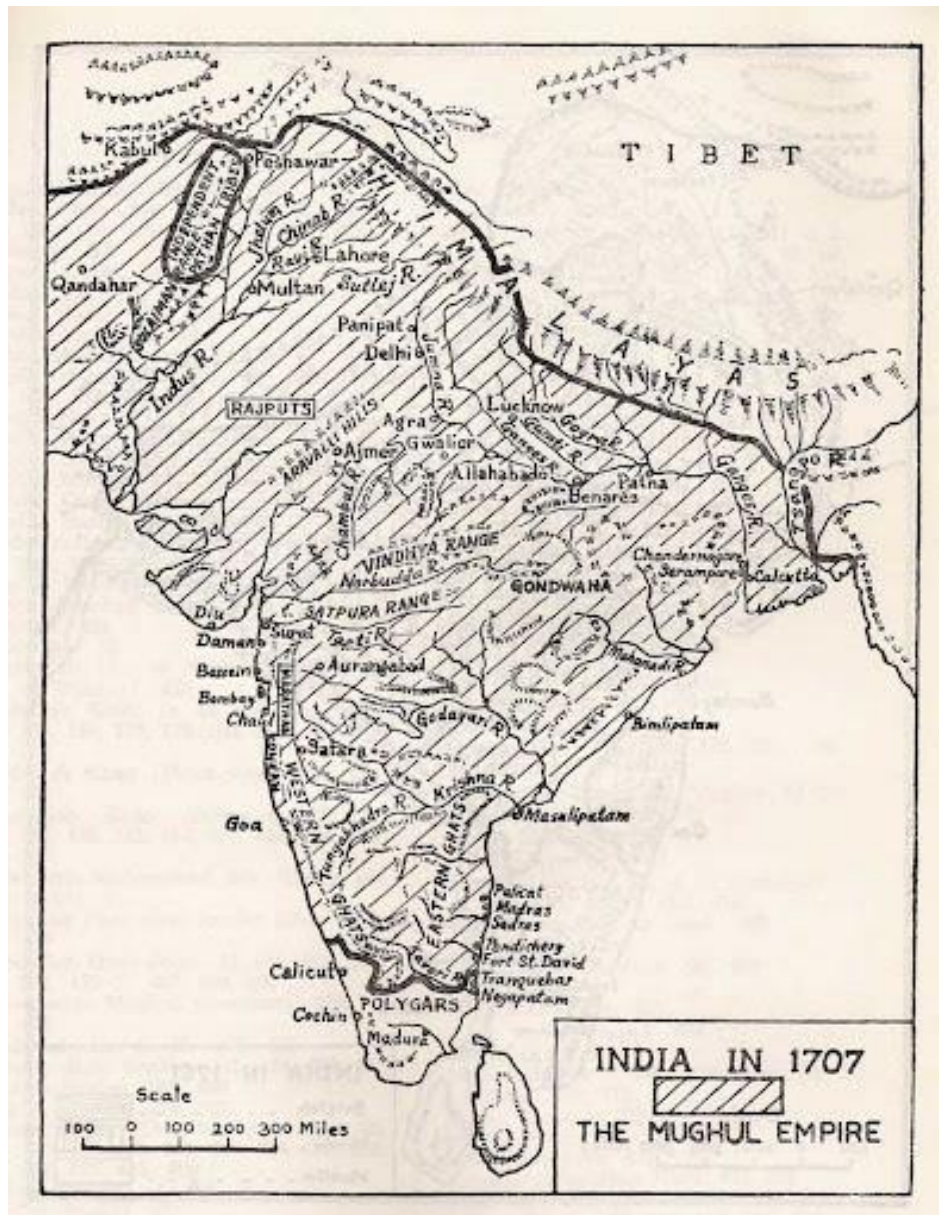
Paintings executed during the reign of Shah Jahan, although accommodating earlier Mughal trends in aesthetics, showed an explicit emphasis on idealization imbued with dazzling ornamentation, decorative surface, and superbly detailed descriptions

Painting achieved a new delicacy and romantic flavour during the reign of Shah Jahan. Love, romance, portraits and durban scenes became the common themes. The artists portrayed the romances of Laila-Majnu, Shirin-Farhad , Kamrup- Kamlata and Baz Bahadur-Rupmati. Elephant fights and men controlling mast elephants with fireworks and spears are also shown in a number of paintings. Another common theme with the Mughal artists from the last quarter of the 17th century and early 18th century is that of a young lady standing under a willow tree holding a branch. The chief artists of Shah Jahan's period were Muhammad Faqirullah Khan, Mir Hashim, Muhammad Nadir, Bichitr, Chitarman, Anupchatar, Manohar and Honhar.

UNDER AURANGZEB AND OTHER RULERS

Aurangzeb's indifference to painting compelled mainly a great artist to shift their bases to other kingdoms in Punjab, Rajasthan and other parts of the country, precipitating a decline in the Mughal painting. Bahadur Shah I (1707-

1712 AD) tried to restore the court patronage of painting. The magnificent work of painting, Shahjahan-nama, was produced during his period. Farruksiyyar (1713- 1718 AD) continued the royal patronage of painting and so did Muhammad Shah Rangila (1719-1748 AD). With the invasion of Nadir Shah in 1739 AD, the en masse exodus of artists from Delhi began and the Mughal school of painting gradually went into oblivion.



India at the greatest extent of the Mughal Empire