

GLIMPSES OF WOMEN IN MUGHAL MINIATURE PAINTINGS

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ABSTRACT

The Miniature Paintings of Medieval India remained as immense significance to overcome the lacunae of knowledge of women in medieval history and art. Mughal School of Miniature Paintings is a landmark in history of Indian paintings. They depicted women in various spheres of their functioning, decoration, engagements and activities representing royal and ordinary women with varied Rajput, Deccani and European influence. The Mughal art was centered on the imperial court and was very unique in its depiction. The theme of court paintings revolved around the literary, mythical and secular themes. Scenes from the royal court, hunting expeditions, past-times, cultural pursuits, references from literary texts were often displayed through these paintings. The Mughal style of painting also inspired Hindu painters who came up with miniatures depicting stories from 'Ramayana' and 'Mahabharata'. Women of different status, were depicted, the difference clearly marked by costumes, ornamentation and placement, but with equal emphasis on beauty and style of execution.

Keywords: Women, Mughal Miniatures, Padshahnama, Razm Nama, Tutinama, Hamzanama Harem, costumes, jewellery, Museums, colours, Royal and common women.

The Mughal period in Medieval Indian history had seen widespread cultural development, especially in the field of miniature Paintings. This school being a diverse mix of cultural, religious and artistic traditions became one of the richest and most productive School of Miniature paintings.

The Mughal School originated during the reign of Akbar. This art of painting developed as a blending of Persian and Indian ideas and continuation of Islamic tradition of miniature painting. It had Hindu, Jain, Buddhist and European influences on its style.

Humayan's major known commission was a Khamsa of Nizami. Mughal painting predominantly developed and flourished during the reigns of Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan.

During the reign of Akbar, the imperial court apart from being the centre of administrative authority also emerged as a centre of cultural excellence. Akbar inherited and expanded his father's library and atelier of court painters and paid close personal attention to its output. He had studied painting in his youth under Abdus-Samad. ⁽¹⁾

Important manuscripts of the time are Tutinama ("Tales of a Parrot"), Hamzanama Sa'di's masterpiece, the Gulistan, Darab Nama, Khamsa of Nizami, Padshah Nama, etc.

As Mughal-derived painting spread to Hindu courts, Hindu epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were also illustrated, included the themes with animal fables, individual portraits and paintings on scores of different themes. Other works translated into Persian were the love story of Nala and Damayanti.

Mughal painting flourished during the late 16th and early 17th centuries with spectacular works of art by master artists such as Basawan, Lal, Daswanth and Miskin. Another influence on the evolution of style during Akbar's reign was Kesu Das, who understood and developed "European techniques of rendering space and volume". ⁽²⁾

Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad continued to be chief painters at Akbar's atelier, where more than a hundred painters of various nationalities were engaged to illustrate Persian manuscripts. Most of these painters were Hindus from Kashmir, Gujarat, and Punjab, who brought with them the traditions of local Schools.

The Hindu influence is already apparent in the earliest works of the Akbar School, such as the illustrations of the Romance of Amir Hamza.⁽³⁾ Among the foremost Hindu artists were Daswanth, Basawan, Lal, Bhim, Gujarati, Khem Karam, Dharam Das, Manohar, Nar Singh and others. The sub-imperial School of Mughal painting included artists such as Mushfiq, Kamal, and Fazl. During the first half of the 18th Century; many Mughal-trained artists left the imperial workshop to work at Rajput courts. These include artists such as Bhawanidas and his son Dalchand.

Jahangir had an artistic inclination and during his reign Mughal painting developed further. Brushwork became finer and the colours lighter. Jahangir was also deeply influenced by European painting. During his reign he came into direct contact with the English Crown and was sent gifts of oil paintings, which included portraits of the King and Queen. He encouraged his royal atelier to take up the single point perspective favoured by European artists, unlike the flattened multi-layered style used in traditional miniatures. He particularly encouraged paintings depicting events of his own life, individual portraits, and studies of birds, flowers and animals.

The Jahangirnama, written during his life time, which is an autobiographical account of Jahangir's reign, has several paintings. It was secular art, dealt with court life, durbar scenes, portraits of royal males and women, birds, flowers, animals, forest, hunting and daily life scenes, flora and fauna and love scenes. Some of the finest painters in the period of Jahangir were Nadir, Murad, Bishan Das, Manohar, Gobardhan, Mansur and Farrukh Beg.

During the reign of Shah Jahan, themes including musical parties; lovers, sometimes in intimate positions, on terraces and gardens; and ascetics gathered around a fire, etc. Aurangzeb did not actively encourage Mughal paintings, but as miniature art continued under number of patrons.

The themes on women became popular subject during Jahangir period due to powerful influence of Nur Jahan. Her creative abilities ranged from costumes designing to hunting. The Muslim royal ladies had generally lived in separate quarters called 'Zenana' or 'Harem' apartments inaccessible to strangers, an ample spaced enclosure. Mothers, sisters, wives, daughters, concubines and all relatives of the king housed there. ⁽⁴⁾ The depiction of Mughal women evolved from a mixture of Indian, Persian and European models and the Rajput, Mongol and European women can be identified by their different physiognomy and clothing.

Some prominent Women of Mughal India are Aisha Sultan Begum, Aurangabadi Mahal, Bakshi Banu Begum, Bega Begum, Bibi Jamal Khatun, Dilras Banu Begum, Fakhr-un-Nissa Gauharara Begum, Gulbadan Begum, Gulchehra Begum, Hamida Banu Begum, Jahanara Begum, Jahanzeb Banu Begum, Jana Begum, Khanzada Begum, Ladli Begum, Mah Chuchak Begum, Mumtaz Mahal, Maham Begum, Malika-i-Jahan, Malika-uz-Zamani, Mariam-uz-Zamani, Nadira Banu, Nawab Bai, Nur Jahan, Padshah Begum, Qudsia Begum, Qutlugh Nigar Khanum, Rahmat Banu Begum, Roshanara Begum, Ruqaiya Sultan Begum, Sahib-i Jamal Begum, Salima Sultan Begum, Shahar Banu Begum, Taj Bibi Bilqis Makani, Zeb-un-Nisa, Zinat Maha, Zinat-un-Nissa.

Sahifa Banu was a princess in the court of Jahangir and the only woman artist to gain fame in the Mughal era. The other women artists who painted between 1599 and 1605 were Nini, Nadira Banu and Rabiya Banu.

Interesting Mughal Miniatures from numerous manuscripts and Muraqqas (Albums) portray professional women in Zennana and as well as the Court and also common women engaged in different works to earn daily livelihood. ⁽⁵⁾

While looking at the Mughal miniatures we can see that they resemble the Persian style of paintings. The costumes shown in these paintings also represent the lifestyle prevalent in the period of Mughal Emperors and Rajput kings. Especially the women figures painted in Mughal miniatures depict the characteristics of Indian tradition of the time.

Of great importance for the formation of the Mughal style of painting was Akbar's personal interest in European art. From European paintings the Hindu artists learned about perspective and modeling. They introduced the third dimension, which is apparent in the rendering of figures and landscapes.

Christianity also fascinated the Mughals. In one letter, Fr Jerome Xavier reports to his masters in Goa that "we remain nearly all night in conversation with Akbar, relating many things of Christ our Lord and his saints." ⁽⁶⁾

European influence was seen in gold background garments, modeled draperies, the star like flowers shimmering against a dark background, elegant-plants, thin washes of colour, romantic crag and castle, glimpses of gleaming white palaces and luminous backgrounds. The heavily shaded faces of human beings, delicate foam like hair, sensitive tropical textiles, long and elegant figures, tiny feet encased in golden slippers, representation of angels, fairies, with typical European look and dress, Illustrations of Christian subjects like of Mary, Madonna, etc. Use of European renaissance cap and knee breeches were copied from foreign sources. Features like pointed nose, small mouth, almond-shaped eyes, the eye corners extending to the ears, double chin of women are also impacts of western Indian tradition.

Most interestingly the use of oil for painting attracted Mughal artists who executed several miniatures on same basis. The Colours of green and brown also dominated the style of enclosing the miniatures in oval format, too derived their inspiration from European painting on the whole.

In these paintings, men and women are shown wearing long flowing robes and high conical caps in standing positions. Women particularly were dressed in cholis and traditional trousers with a gauze dupatta across the bodice. Several portfolios of Tutinama are also stated to be similar to the Malwa manuscripts with illustrations but with distinct perfection. The difference is traced to the tasteful colours in Tutinama paintings, which make it rich in colours with graded quality. ⁽⁷⁾

A particular tale narrated by the parrot to rivet the attention of his mistress, as she is about to leave the house in the night, is also depicted in the 35th to 37th paintings in the illustrated version of the Tutinama. The main narrator of the 52 stories of Tutinama is a parrot, who tells stories to his owner, a woman called Khojasta, in order to prevent her from committing any illicit affair while her husband (a merchant by the name Maimunis) is away on business. The story related by the parrot is of a Brahmin boy falling in love with a princess, considered a fated (doomed) situation. The parrot concludes the narration, towards day break, with the advice to Kojasta that she should also have everything in life including her husband. ⁽⁸⁾

Akbar gave the order to translate the Hindu epic Mahabharata, known as the Razmnama, or "Book of Wars," into Persian. Three miniatures from a manuscript of this work are in the Museum. Akbar's own copy is in the Jaipur Library.

In the illustrations of the Razmnama the Indian influence is very strong. The theme of the king as a lover originated in Mughal paintings, where the king was pictured making love with a favoured mistress or with his women bathing, playing holi, boating or enjoy in a garden. Such paintings not only acknowledged a Women presence at the court, they made that presence a powerful device in the construction of the king's authority, an authority that partly derived from the king's virtues, among them virility, beauty, and artfulness as all over⁽⁹⁾

Early examples of women's portraiture in North India is the circa 1615 also came from the Mughal painting of Jahangir's birth from the Jahangir Nama.⁽¹⁰⁾ Several early-seventeenth-century Mughal paintings of a woman, posed as if in a portrait, may be portraits of Nurjahan.⁽¹¹⁾

Portraits served a vital function as gifts. Rulers, nobles, officers, even servants gave one another portraits in the dozens to signify loyalty and allegiance. Shahjahan, for instance, was to send vanquished enemies his portrait to elicit the loyalty from them.⁽¹²⁾ There were many indications that portraits of women were not strictly prohibited, scholars have sometimes speculated that painters intended these portrait-like paintings to represent specific women.⁽¹³⁾

The colour schemes of Mughal paintings are often subdued the outlines soft and fluid. The formation of the Mughal style, created by all the artists working for Akbar the Great, was a synthesis of Persian, Indian, and European elements.⁽¹⁴⁾

Since the supreme specialists were not enabled access to the court women, it has been recommended that these canvases were adjusted from outlines executed by Women craftsmen inside the zenana.⁽¹⁵⁾ The depiction of Mughal women evolved from a mixture of Indian, Persian and European models, and the Rajput, Mongol and European women can be identified by their different physiognomy and clothing. However, since male artists were not allowed to enter the zenana, these were still archetype depictions rather than individual portraits.⁽¹⁶⁾

The 17th century Mughal paintings also show women engaged in leisure activities within the harem or away from it hunting or visiting holy figures or in composing letters or poetry. For instance, Babur's daughter, Gulbadan Begum, was credited the authorship of Humayun Namah. In 'Humayun Namah' we find the names of other educated and distinguished ladies. Gulberg, Bega Begum, Dildar Begum and Ayishaa Suhan Khanam were some educated ladies during the age of Babur and Humayun.⁽¹⁷⁾

Mughal culture was one of the richest the world has ever seen. When they represent their rulers, they create idealized, introspective figures lost in the quiet enchantment of love, or music, or merely the perfume of a beautiful flower. ⁽¹⁸⁾

As in the allegorical portraits of Jahangir which changed the direction of Mughal painting about 1615, we have been transferred back to a world of symbolism and hierarchy. ⁽¹⁹⁾

The bright, jewel-like colours evoke the dazzling hues still beloved in contemporary India: vivid saris and Holi powders, bright orange desserts and multicoloured cargo trucks. The vivid colours are as constant in the paintings as the emphasis on courtly pleasure. ⁽²⁰⁾

The rich inks were frequently made from minerals like copper salts or cinnabar (viridian and red, respectively, but also from more biological sources, like insects, which were used to conjure crimson. The particularly vivid yellow found in the paintings has an unlikely source: the urine from cows specially fed on mango leaves.

The paintings also reflect the contemporary social and political condition of the people. Social customs and courtly customs as depicted in these paintings refer to the social hierarchy, too. In some of the paintings there is presence of foreign ambassadors. That depiction tells us that the Mughal rulers had active trade relations with other countries.

Many of them went on excursions and pleasure trips but most of them were interested in dresses, toilet and ornaments: ⁽²¹⁾ Paintings of women as individual subjects were a popular theme in the Mughal court during the mid-seventeenth century. Most of the portraits are based on imagination.

The Mughal Paintings focused their attention on depicting beauty and to the intricacies of the designs of jewels and drapes and clothes. Other features included rich designs and ornaments, Two-dimensional spacing, tailored garments with draperies, fine woven muslins, embroidered slippers, Gold embroidery, emphasized and used general setting with the flat aerial perspective, colours from the indigenous materials like they extracted green from the green beetles, yellow colour from the dried urine of cow, the colours with gold and silver were used extensively in the paintings showing the love scenes of Princes and other court figures, delicate use of brushes and paints, the colours used by the artists of Mughal era chiefly came from materials like minerals, vegetables, precious stones, indigo, and conch shells, the painters sponsored by the Emperor have used gold and silver to decor the paintings, as such luxury was limited to the court painters only, based upon close observation of nature, fine and delicate drawing along with calligraphic text descriptions, generally on border, with High aesthetic merit, primarily Aristocratic in depiction, mostly Secular in nature, portraits with lively effect and balanced composition, gold arabesque, sweeping calligraphic contours, paradisiacal settings, fantastic lilac rocks, pictures of

cool extravagance and starkly powerful shapes and to certain degree in the dressing patterns, marbled decoration for pictures and calligraphy, gorgeously tooled gold surfaces, heavy shading, fluid lines, wavy contours, puckered lips, cat-like eyes and pointed chins with Iranian influence in few paintings, distinctive features such as aiming at realism, precise portraits, depiction of historical events, the stark background restrained in line and colour, width and monumental quality in spacing the picture, a general sweep in postures, enamel like surface and finish, thin coating of paints, bold workmanship, mass and movement of human figures, placing the subjects against an empty space, minute treatment of hair, colours like soft blue, delicate purple and pink and of plastic rendering of the draperies, the traces of brickwork and the depiction of birds.

Many important museums like National Museum, New Delhi, Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum, The City Palace, Jaipur, Central Museum, Albert Hall, Jaipur, Government Museum, Ajmer in Rajasthan, Lalbhai Dalpatbhai Museum, Gujarat, (also known as L. D. Museum), N.C.Mehta Gallery, Ahmedabad, B.J. Institute Museum and MSS Collection, Ahmedabad in Gujarat, Himachal State Museum, Shimla, Museum of Kangra Art, Dharmashala, Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba in Himachal Pradesh, State Archeological Museum, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, Central Museum, Indore in Madhya Pradesh, Prince of Wales Museum of Western India (Presently, Chhatrapati Shivaji Vastu Sangrahalaya), Mumbai, Jehangir Art Gallery in Maharashtra, Karnataka Government Museum and Venkatappa Art Gallery in Karnataka, Salarjung Museum, Hyderabad, Department of Archeology and Museums, Hyderabad and Telangana State Archaeology Museum, Hyderabad in Telangana State contain large number of Mughal paintings representing women .

These Mughal paintings in Museums illustrated women in various realms like, women enjoying Huqqa on terrace, Madonna and Baby Jesus, Ragini Malavi Gaur, Nobleman offering jewells to a Woman, drinking scene (Ragini Gunkali), ladies in a garden., Sirajudaula with his consort, portrait of Jabunnisa, Nadira playing Chess, Noorjahan playing Chaupad, Mughal Queen and King riding an Elephant, King's drinking scene, Empress Noorjahan, Mother and a Child, Mughal Princess playing veena, Christian Theme, Madonna with baby Christ, portrait of a Woman, tantric Theme, devotees and Yogini, standing women enjoying Huqqa, women simply lounging on terraces or caught in an embrace with a prince, portrait of Khosrow Shireen, portrait of A Women with trees, a Woman seated, a Women standing, ladies Offering Wine, a Woman with pan and Box, Bathing Scene., standing Princess with a friend, women standing beneath a willow tree, Shahjahan and a Woman, Madonna and the Child, Royal enjoying fireworks, congregation of Man and a Woman., women engaged in leisure activities within the harem, Women hunting, Women visiting holy figures, a noble woman, a Mughal princess, ladies in a garden, Nur Jahan, a young woman playing a Veena to a parakeet, Women with turban with a

royal look. a symbol of her absent lover, Women performer with a tambura. Women simply lounging on terraces, showing or caught in an embrace with a Prince, The heroine (nayika) awaiting her lover's return, The Ragini, a women personification of the classical Indian musical modes of the Ragamala, Women with voluptuous proportions, angular faces and large almond-shaped eyes, durbar scenes, Women amidst animals, birds and flowers, Tuti-Nama, Hamza-Nama, hunting scenes, Women in royal courts, Graceful, slim-waisted, well-proportioned women depictions, the pictures of semi-nude figures of dancing girls and musicians, Woman kneeling on a stool, combing her hair, facing right, riding horse, etc., Mughal court Women, Mughal prince and ladies in a garden, ladies enjoying wine., depicted Kings and Queens fond of animals and birds., Mughal women visiting Hindu holy woman, etc.

A close observation of women in these paintings reveals that besides the usual representation of women as royal ladies and women performing variety of tasks at royal court, several new themes and elements were introduced into to painting seen in the depiction of angels, fairies, and paintings based on European models like that of Virgin Mary, Madonna and the Child, etc. The pictures of Ordinary women were also portrayed with reality. The women in most of the schools were depicted with attractive combining sensuous looks and enticing gestures. The emphasis was almost exclusively on the emotions of the woman or on the situations or activities in which a woman finds herself. The pictures of Royal women, maidens and other ladies of royal court are painted elegantly with the lovely gardens, inner courtyards, architectural settings, pictorial designs, realistic faces and decorative background. They were illustrated with great originality giving the real picture of the time. The placing of the Queen at the top of few paintings makes her royal status clear. The dress-patterns with elaborate design also give fantastic look to their features. Maiden's depiction highlights their important role as part of royalty or royal atmosphere. These miniatures elucidating Royal and Ordinary women in various spheres achieved the grace of medieval sculpture visible clearly in different poses of Women.

Royal Women are depicted as Queens and Princess, watching dance and musical performances, relaxing in a garden, smoking Huqqa, drinking wine, picnics, garden, terraces, playing games like chess, chaupad or chaupar, hunting and shooting, riding horse ,etc, within palace interiors and exteriors, composing poetry, writing letters, admiring herself and her beauty in a mirror, bathing, decorating herself, in romantic themes, playing Holi, music, sleeping and relaxing, worshipping, as Raginis, etc. Women were depicted in various realms like in Mughal harem. The Harem scenes were painted in relation to the contemporary medieval atmosphere.

Mughal Miniature also depicted maidens as serving and decorating royal ladies,dancers as dancing at royal court, musicians and other artists performing at Royal courts and terraces and courtyards. Musicians and dancers were an integral part of court life in the Mughal period.

Common were depicted as weaving, painting, praying, spinning, carrying water, smoking huqqa, fetching water from the well, dancing, singing, playing various musical instruments, looking after children, etc. Two categories of common or ordinary women were depicted, ordinary women at royal court with royal costumes and culture and extensive jewellery and ordinary women in general landscape with simple life style and ornaments.

General themes on were on love, romance and longing, sexual Desire and women, women and beauty family concept, spiritual and religious themes. The secular attitude of the rulers and the close contact between two sections of the society namely Hindus and Muslims also had its impact on the very life of both these sections and also had its influence on art styles. Miniature paintings remained as representations of expressions, feelings, lifestyles, things and situations of women. Women painters like Nadira Banu, Ruqaiya Banu, Nini and Sahifa Banu highlighted the glorious life of Princesses, Queens and other ladies of the royal Mughal harem in their works. Mughal women were beautiful, educated and extremely talented.

In totality Mughal School of Miniature paintings emphasized on aristocratic and cultural life of royalty and social life of common woman and remained as rich source for knowing the history of women of medieval times.

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