ESSENCE AND APPEARANCE: LOOKING AGAIN AT MUGHAL PORTRAITS

B. N. Goswamy
Presented in English
31 March 2003

Drawing the likeness of anything is called taawir.... His Majesty (the Emperor Akbar) 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 them."
Abu’l Fazl, Ain-i Akbari

As regards myself (the emperor Jahangir), my liking for painting and practice in judging it have arrived at such a point that when any work is brought before me, either of deceased artists or of those of the present day, without the names being told me, I say on the spur of the moment that it is the work of such and such a man. And if there be a picture containing many portraits, and each face be the work of a different master, I can discern which face is the work of each of them. If any other person has put in the eye and eyebrow of a face, I can perceive whose work the original face is, and who has painted the eye and eyebrows.

Jahangir, Tuzuk-i Jahangiri

The Mughals were—patrons as much as their painters—"intent upon the present moment, and profoundly interested in individuality", as that subtle knower of the arts of India, Ananda Coomaraswamy, observed while discussing Rajput painting. Commenting upon the art of the Mughals, he said that among their 'greatest successes' were those that were achieved in portraiture, the 'sheer intensity of observation, passionate delineation', raising some 'individual works to the highest possible rank'.

The great quality of Mughal portraits apart, something to which one will return, it may not be far wrong to state that in India the very notion of what can be called 'true portraiture' came in only with the Mughals. This is not to say that there was no interest in, or mention of, portraiture in the earlier periods. Prior to the 16th century, in fact, there are profuse references to portraits in the literature of India, but how portraiture, likeness in other words, was viewed was very different from what it is generally understood to be.

Dr. B. N. Goswamy is a well-known art historian and former professor of Art History at the Punjab University, Chandigarh. He is an authority on Indian art and has published extensively on various aspects of the art form. He has also served as curator for major exhibitions of Indian art in Paris, San Francisco and Zurich.

Portraiture in pre-Mughal India implied no lack of observation, but it meant essentially laying the right kind of emphasis onlokshanas, characteristic or cognitive attributes that 'defined' a person, or made one recognize him. Simply put, the Mughal painter, on the other hand, was prone to looking unblinkingly at a person when he wanted to take a likeness.

It is possible to go into these contrasting approaches at length, the one intent upon essence, and the other upon appearance: a large number of images can be considered. But a simple example or two, even in purely verbal terms, might make the point. Consider, thus, this description by the emperor Jahangir in his Memoirs, of his father, the great Akbar:

In his august appearance he (Akbar) was of middle height, but inclining to be tall; he was of the hue of wheat; his eyes and eyebrows were black, and complexion dark than fair; he was lion-bodied, with a broad chest, and his hands and arms long. On the left side of his nose he had a flesthy mole, very agreeable in appearance, of the size of half a pea ... His august voice was very loud and in speaking and explaining had a peculiar richness. In his actions and movements he was not like the people of the world, and the glory of God manifested in him ....

Much earlier than this, in what one might call the native Indian tradition, the 7th century poet, Bana, described his patron, the emperor Harsha whom he had the opportunity of observing day after day — being his court poet and chronicler — in the most conventional of terms, classic descriptions of a Chakravartin, 'the Great Man turning the Wheel, never far from his thoughts. He speaks thus of the redness of Harsha's lips "bedewing all the regions of space like the exudation of branches of the heavenly tree"; the great emperor's toenails were "like the ten directions of space impersonate", spreading rays "white like fine linen"; his two thighs "bore the weight of the earth which rested on his heart, like two sandalwood trees with the rays from crest jewels of the serpents clustered around them", and so on.

The eyes of one of Harsha's generals are described by Bana again as "being exceedingly soft, sweet, white and large, as if they had drunk the milk Ocean"; his forehead was "full and wide beyond even the mountain Meru's flank ..." It is clear that here Bana is constantly moving from the world of observation into that of iconography, similes and poetic flamboyance interesting him more than actual, verifiable detail. The approach is aimed at conjuring up a vision, an ideal that transcends ages, rather than invoking a real image of a person caught in a moment of time.

Whatever caused this change of approach, a number of factors come to mind, the fact remains that for and under the Great Mughals magnificent portraits were made. Understandably, turning out likenesses of each succeeding emperor must have been the most natural thing for the painters to do, for the arts centred essentially round the court.

Even from what has survived the ravages of time, it is possible to form a fair idea of the numbers and the quality of these portraits. The emperors can be seen everywhere: in illustrated manuscripts that chronicled the reigns, in the company of other figures in allegorical images, receiving princes and generals, issuing commands, conferring favours upon the elect, inside the harem, by themselves in isolation, or entering imperial albums. There were, naturally, other figures too that were carefully observed and portrayed, but almost always attention goes first to royal figures. Especially to those in which an emperor is seen by himself, gazing royally in one direction, or contemplating something, like a jewel or a flower, held in one elegant hand.
There is stylization in these images, but also keen observation.

When Jahangir is rendered by the painters Hashim and Nadir-al-Zaman, holding and gazing at a portrait of his late father, Akbar, (figure 1) the viewer’s eye is ensnared at once by the sheer magnificence of the image: the noble, self-assured head surrounded by a glittering nimbus, the splendid patterning on the brocaded green-and-gold jama, the elegantly tied turban with a wrap-around string of pearls and emeralds and rubies at its base, the double-string of pearls and emeralds and rubies worn round the neck, the gold pendant. The wonderfully observed portrait of his father that the emperor holds up does not have the same air of grandeur, for the splendour of this portrait is far simpler and there is no jewellery on his person. But there is gravity in it and great presence, brought in as much by the finely rendered nimbus that surrounds the head as by the orb of authority and dominion that rests in his hand.

There is subtlety in the whole rendering for neither the emperor nor the painters could have been able to cast out of their minds the not so distant events of Jahangir, while still a prince, having virtually rebelled against his father and set up a parallel court. Is there a sense of guilt in the painting then, one wonders, a moment of introspection perhaps? But these thoughts come to mind only when one dwells upon the picture or goes into history; simply viewed, the painting stands out as yet another brilliantly rendered image of royal refugence.

Magnificence again is the theme of Nadir-al-Zaman’s portrait of Shah Jahan examining a newly-cut seal. The royal head is nimbatte, with fine rays radiating from the circle which is left uncouloured directly behind the emperor’s head to throw it into sharper relief; in his left hand the emperor holds the engraved seal, much as he would hold a flower or a ruby in some state portraits; his right arm covers the hilt of the dagger that is tucked in his waist-band, while the hand rests lightly on a sword. The precious look, the sharply observed features, the superbly coloured mauve dress set off by the golden-yellow fastenings of the jama under the right armpit, the strings of pearls and emeralds and rubies that bedeck the turban and the neck and the wrists of the emperor: everything is carefully worked in. The moment chosen for the rendering of this portrait with a seal – the accession of the emperor to the throne of India – is naturally meaningful. But, once again, what comes across at sight is an image of sumptuousness and splendour.

Portraits such as these – imperial, sub-imperial, royal, princely – are what came to define our view of Mughal work: it is easy to understand that this level of quality was not always reached, but a great many painters were involved, and a significant number of opulent works were produced. What does not often receive an equal amount of attention, or at least appreciation, however, is the portraits of persons of lower worldly rank that the painters so often turned out. A whole range of them has come down: images of holy men and seekers, poets and painters, physicians and astrologers. More often than not, they appear to be simple works, sometimes only brush drawings devoid of colour, not demanding close attention from the viewer. But when one regards them with care, one discerns in them a sense of warmth, a feeling of closeness to the subject that is so often missing from the more formal, state portraits that the period is so rich in.

The most well-known among the portraits of relatively ordinary men is, of course, the celebrated ‘Dying Man’: Inayat Khan, whom Jahangir described in his memoirs as just ‘skin stretched over bones’, someone whose bones had even ‘begun to disintegrate’. But there are so many others that are compelling in their quality: a painter like the adivanavaday, humble petition in hand, attempting to catch the emperor’s eye; a nearly blind Mullah seated listening to a poorly clad servant paring a fruit; two un-named saintly men conversing seated in the open, under a tree; Gossain Jadrup, gaunt and bent, in his cavernous hovel, with the emperor Jahangir facing him; a group of Sufis and poets occupying a simple carpet, reciting or listening (figure 2); the physician ‘Masulal Zaman’ seen by himself in a thumbnail sketch (figure 3); these are the kind of images one speaks of here. There is an air of intimacy in these studies, a ‘passionate delineation’, that leaves one deeply affected. It is possible that the whistling of distance from the subject, a sense of identification on the painter’s part with the inner self of these unpretentious characters, is what makes them what they are. But, whatever the case, these are supreme achievements: simple but extremely refined, sharply observed but as if from the inside.

Not infrequently, these paintings of ordinary men, caught in the spiral of time, succeed in touching off thoughts in the viewer’s mind that come from somewhere else than the work itself. From the domains of literature, for instance, or of music. On my part, for instance, that wonderful portrait of an old man ascribed to Nadir-al-Zaman – leaning upon a staff, telling beads, lean, desolated frame, body marked by the ravages of time, bent back, stooped shoulders – never fails to bring to mind a relatively recent poem by the great Urdu poet, Sardar Ja’afir.

The painting is filled with allusions: the vast uncharted area of darkness behind the figure suggestive of approaching end, the delicately rendered flowering plant in the foreground as if it were a promise of return. But so also, with similar allusions and assertions, is Ja’afir’s poem which he titled ‘My Journey’ and begins with the words: “Phir ik din alsaa aayega/ haathon ke kamal kumbhalyangey/ aankhon ke diye baj bajeeyangey...”. Nearly four hundred years separate the painting from the poem, but I am tempted to cite it in full here. This, because somehow it enhances the painting does not only allow us to see it differently, but also makes us wonder if thoughts such as these were also not coursing through the painter’s head four centuries ago. In any case this is how, roughly translated, the poem runs:

And then that day will come:
when the lotuses of my hand will begin to wilt,
the laments of my eyes will grow dim,
and, from the branch that my tongue is,
all butterflies of speech and articulation,
shall fly away
one by one.

All the forms that I know, all shapes
that I hold dear,
a blossom like flowers, wreathed in smiles,
will disappear, sinking to the bottom
deep, eddying waters.
And this earth, this sliver of diamond
that I treasured,
will, for me, cease to be.
All the days, and all the duks
that I know,
will turn into a dew-drop,
a tear perhaps?
or a farfal of dust?

All ragins, those melodies that I know
by the name of the coursing of blood
inside veins,
the breathing of the heart,
will fall silent.
Will someone ask then:
where is he, the ‘Sardar’ that we knew?

But I know that I shall come back
again;
And shall speak again
through the hisping tongues of little children,
the sweet twitter of birds.
When seeds sprout in the soil
and little shoots will begin caressing
the surface of the earth
with their tiny fingers,
I shall be there.
And I shall open my eyes once more
and see the world afresh, through
each leaf,
each bud that blossoms.
Then shall I rest little dew-drops,
as if judging their weight,
on my outstretched palm.
I shall be everything then,
everywhere:
in the colour of henna
in the sounds of words
in the rhythm of poetry
in the glow upon the cheek of each
newly wed bride.
I shall be everywhere then,
and everything.
When winter will come
and leaves begin to fall
it is under my feet that they will crackle.
And all the blue lakes that are in the sky,
all the gold in the streams that flow
on this earth,
shall be reflecting then, my presence.
And every tale that is told anymore
shall belong to me.
‘Sardar’ shall be the name of each lover
that there is.
And ‘Suitand’ that of each beloved.

What am I?
A fugitive, elusive moment
in this never-house of Time:
Just a drop that lingers
and trembles as it makes its way
from the carcase of the past
into the goulter of the future.
I go to sleep, then wake.
And then go off to sleep again.
This is the way it has been
since Time began:
I am but a part of the Play that there is.
Death does not come to me.
I do not cease to be.

Figure 1
Jahangir gazing at a portrait of his late father, Akbar

Figure 2
A group of Sufis and poets occupying a simple carpet

Figure 3
The physician ‘Masulal Zaman’
The Journal of Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah Issue 26

The journal Hadeeth ad-Dar of Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) is published quarterly. The views, views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the policy of Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI). Complimentary subscriptions are available upon written request. Produced by the editorial staff of Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) in the State of Kuwait. © 2009 GRIEC.

CONTENTS

About the journal

The journal Hadeeth ad-Dar of Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) is intended to share the wealth and beauty of Islamic culture contained within the extensive and comprehensive al-Sabah Collection of Islamic art and the variety of scholarly and artistic activities associated with the collection.

The collection itself, ranging from early Islam to the 19th century, is organised according to both historical period and geographical region. The reference library and the publications of DAI are closely related to the collection.

DAI has sponsored archaeological excavations in Baharia, Upper Egypt that date to the Fatimid period. We are also involved in the Raya excavation at al-Tur, in Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. At present, our annual lecture series has been revived and is a focal point for historians and other specialists in the field. It features talks by prominent international scholars on various topics of Islamic art, history, archaeology and architecture.

02 4 February 2008
The Indian Ocean in Medieval Maps and Stories
Dr. Marina A. Tolmacheva

09 28 January 2008
"Collecting for Pleasure and Prestige - The Kunstkammer- Collections of the Habiburs"
Dr. Agnes Stillfried

13 21 January 2007
International Sea-Trade Routes: Makran and the Arabian Sea at the Dawn of the Portuguese Arrival
Prof. Valeria Fiorani Piacentini

19 19 November 2007
Music to Wash Off the Sea: Communal Sea Song Tradition of Kuwait
Dr. Lisa Urkovich

24 5 November 2007
A Trial of Ibn Khaldun
Prof. Dr. Juma Sheikha

30 21 May 2006
Characteristics of Arab Scientific Heritage
Dr. Nichola Fares

33 24 April 2006
History of the Gulf Region in the Ottoman Archives
Prof. Dr. Zakariya Qurshun

39 28 February 2005
Is Islam 'iconophobic'?
Prof. Dr. Silvia Naef

44 31 January 2005
Solar Conscious Design in Architecture
Dr. Adnan al Anzi

49 27 September 2004
Syrian Glazed Jars of the Mamluk Period
Prof. Géza Fehérvári

53 17 May 2004
Writing on Genealogy: Phenomenon and Reason
Mr. Fayez al-Badani al-Harbi

58 31 March 2003
Essence and Appearance: Looking Again at Mughal Portraits
Dr. B. N. Goswamy

This publication is sponsored in part by:

LNS 98T
Panel, cotton with silk embroidery
Turkey
18th Century
H: 190 cm
المحتويات

حديث الدار

تشمل دورات بحثية الدار، التي تقدم عن بحث الآثار الإسلامية، إلى تطبيقات الإسلامية، بما يتميز بها الثقافة الإسلامية. كما تدعم الدار مجالات البحث والبحث والبحث والبحث والبحث والبحث. حديث الدار يهدف إلى إبراز جهود الدار في مجالات الأدب الأدبي والفلسفة والثقافة الإسلامية، وتتضمن مجموعات الصور مفتوحة تاريخية تعود إلى الفترة المبكرة من الدولة الإسلامية وحتى القرن الثاني عشر الهجري. قد يشرح هذه المجموعة إزاء تطورها وتاريخها تبعًا للحالة الاجتماعية التي تحيط بها، والواقع الجغرافي الذي تحيط به.

أما ماكيه الدار فيضم مراجعات و интерьерات ذات صلة بالموضوع.

رغم دار الآثار الإسلامية عملات التنوير الأثرية في مدينة الرقة بمعظم مساحة الذي تعود إلى العصر الفارسي، كما تضم بعض الصور تظهر روابط بين بعض من صور الدار.

النافذة على العالم: مهنة إضافة تأثيرية، وعذاراء بارزة يتضمنها عادات وعادات جيل النحو التشكيلية والفلسفية الإسلامية للأثر والفلسفة البديلة العمليات، ويمكنني من الموضوعات، التي ترتبط بالهجرة، وفصولهم من الموضوعات.

هذا البرنامج

مجلة دار الآثار الإسلامية - العدد 21
در الآثار الإسلامية
معهد الفنون العالمية
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزيع
مجلة الرقة للنشر والتوزيع
المجلة العربية للنشر والتوزirqل