PL. 53  Pilgrim scratching his head
5022–1654 (Tehran, Iran)
Painting signed Reza Abbasi (c. 1530/70–1603)
Washington, The Freer Gallery and Arthur Sackler Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution, P. 1953.12

This splendid image can be seen as a piece of life drawing unconnected with court life, or perhaps a satire on pilgrims on their way to the great Shi‘ite shrine of Mashhad in north-east Iran. However, it may be better considered as an artist’s immediate reaction to the world around him.

PL. 54  Self-portrait of Mr Suyyul Al [?] c. 1540 (Tehran, Iran)
Washington, The Freer Gallery and Arthur Sackler Gallery,
Smithsonian Institution, S. 1986.291

In this charming portrait, the painter’s name is inscribed on the tablet being held by the young man.

Many doubts hang over the identity of the figure; perhaps Mr Suyyul Al who began his career in Iran and ended it in India. However, the confident capture of the draughtsmanship in a style very different from that of the previous illustration would seem to link its creator to the painters of the great royal miniatures. The poem surrounding the page (not visible here) is a kind of panegyric of the beloved.

PL. 55  Young dervish
1603 (Herat, Afghanistan?)
Painting attributed to Muhammad Hamdi
Paris, Louvre Museum, Inv. MA2148

This technically accomplished image was added to an album belonging to Shah Abbas, the most celebrated of the Safavid monarchs. However, rather than the execution it is the detail of the composition—such as the young man’s pose, the way he holds his book, the somewhat exaggerated precision of his headdress—that suggests an artificial construction rather than a portrait from life or the product of a visual experience.
This painting, intended for an album, shows the emperor in all his glory seated on a platform with an hourglass. In front of him we see a Muslim mystic, an Ottoman sultan, the king of England and, it would appear, a Hindu dignitary. The poem, composed in four hemistiches, praises the emperor: "Although kings may stand before him, he seeks guidance of the divinities."

The inscription on the hourglass wishes the prince a thousand years of life. Many of the iconographic and stylistic details showing the Mughal sovereigns' universal ambitions are inspired by European works of art. Babur was adept at adapting them to his style and transforming them into Mughal painting.