An ascetic, two devotees and attendant outside a walled town

19

20 Quran page, Surah V, lines 7-8
21 Page from a Qur'an, late 14th century
The great age of Mughal painting occurred under the Emperors Akbar and Jahangir, ending with Shah Jahan. This period was characterized by active patronage and high quality production. It was a time of great artistic expansion and cultural mixing which combined to create a harmonious, beautiful style of imperial painting.

Mughal miniatures were produced in the royal ateliers. The atelier was led by master artists who were supervised by the emperor. A miniature painting was rarely the work of only one hand. Usually one artist drew the composition and another coloured it. As well, there were artists who specialized in various aspects of a given composition such as the figures, animals, landscape and architecture. A junior artist, or apprentice, would be given the minor portions of the painting to complete. Most of the Imperial miniatures would have been produced in such a manner. On more important commissions, such as the Akbarnama, the emperor would select his favourite artists and designate the miniatures for which they would be responsible.

Miniatures produced at the Mughal court were to fulfill one of two functions. Some were produced to illustrate texts such as epic romances, imperial histories, and scientific and cultural documents. No pictures were made to illustrate the Quran (the Islamic Holy Book) or the Hadith (the Teachings of the Prophet) as figurative imagery is not advocated within a religious context in Islam. If not as textual illustration, the miniatures would have been for mounting within the Imperial albums or muraqqas. Similar to the modern day photo-album or scrap-book, but on a much more luxurious level, the albums were compilations of various types of two-dimensional art ranging from imperial miniatures, Pahari or Rajasthani paintings, Persian miniatures, small European paintings and prints, and what ever else might have caught the emperor's appreciative eye. These albums were compiled for the most part by Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan. They are wonderful documents of the individual talents of the emperors as well as vivid testimonies to their patronage and connoisseurship of the arts.

Miniatures by nature are diminutive in size. Despite their small dimensions, they are wonderful works of detail and observation. This is achieved by very fine painting, often with brushes containing only a few hairs. The medium used for the miniatures was gouache, a non-transparent watercolour. The rich, opaque colours of the painting were achieved by building up each individual layer of paint. Gold was often added to imperial miniatures lending a heightened degree of luxury to the painting.

The religiously tolerant atmosphere of Akbar's court made for a rich cultural milieu. He employed Muslim artists from Iran as well as indigenous Hindu artists. His personal religious quest brought members of various faiths to his court to participate in group and individual discussions. These included representatives from Hinduism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism and Christianity. Those of the latter faith had a particularly significant effect on the imperial painting style, introducing new subject matter, techniques such as perspective, and heightened realism.

Akbar was a great patron of the arts and under him painting developed to the high quality associated with the grand age of Mughal painting. Soft coloured washes, European techniques of perspective and modeling in light and dark, and naturalism characterize this type of painting. The colours chosen were often used in ways unfamiliar to western viewers and initially one may be taken back by the "illogically" coloured hills (Akbar subdues a giant cobra) or animals (see the blue horses in Prince Aurangzeb in Combat with an Amok Elephant or Prince with Hawk Encountering Three Yoginis). The gentle, soft colouring, beautifully apparent in the Akbarnama page (Akbar subdues a giant cobra) is typical of the Mughal style. The washes of colour exhibit an array of tonal qualities, particularly noticeable in background elements, lending a soft and atmospheric sensation.

Heightened naturalism is another characteristic of Mughal miniatures that developed during Akbar's reign and strengthened under Jahangir. The painting depicting the capture of
elephants (c. 1585) shows this emerging trend. The artist has captured the flight of the wild elephants in contrast to the domesticated ones. The anger of the wild beasts is shown in their cries and attacks. Their bodies have been modelled, following European conventions, in tones of gray.

Jahangir in particular was a great lover of nature and his predilection for it spanned flower and animal paintings as well as portraiture. Two portraits from his reign are particularly interesting for the contrast they provide: The first is a portrait of a Persian man holding an arrow (c. 1610). This work is very much in the manner of Iranian Safavid painting, which can be explained by the original leadership of the Mughal atelier by two famed Iranian painters, Khwaja Abd al-Samed and Mir Sayyid Ali. These two artists had instructed the Hindi atelier artists in the Safavid court style. As well, the Mughal court had close ties with the Safavid court which had at one time given refuge to the Mughal Emperor Humayun, Akbar's father. Other Iranian artists also came to work for the Mughal emperors and princes including the Safavid artist Aqa Riza who entered Prince Salim's (later the emperor Jahangir) service by 1589. This portrait of a slender, idealized, beautiful, young man in an elegant and sensuous pose is very much in Aqa Riza's style.

The second portrait, that of Jahangir made by Bishan Das (active 1595–1650), is an example of the court artists' adaptation of European style portraiture. Gifts offered by court visitors to the emperors included examples of European portraiture. From these gifts the court artists learned the modelling of figures and the rendering of distinctive facial-like features. When compared with the portrait of the Persian youth, one can see that Jahangir's portrait is more individualized: his facial features have been modelled in terms of light and shade. His face has been taken from a living likeness, not an idealized vision of beauty as has that of the Persian youth. The strict profile used for the emperor is standard for royal Muslim portraits.

Royal portraiture under Akbar rarely included clues as to the wealth of the Mughal empire. The figures, including that of Akbar, were shown quite humbly and without much ornamentation. The great fortunes of the Mughals became more evident in portraits produced under Jahangir's supervision. The other portrait, though less opulent and wearing a much simpler necklace set with precious stones, a sumptuous gold sash and a pearl rope in his headdress. His hands support a falcon, a bird known for its strong hunting and predatory skills, intelligence and power, all qualities Jahangir would have liked associated with his character.

A portrait of two elderly gentlemen conversing in a landscape, dating from late in Jahangir's reign (c. 1620), shows further influence of European portraiture. Realism is apparent in the softness of their beards, in their naturalistic stances, and in the facial expressions (especially that of the weary man to the right who gazes off into the distance). Elements from nature are carefully depicted such as the ducks and fish in the pond at the men's feet, the birds in the trees above and the two deer that are just visible behind a distant hill.

Art of Imperial Mughal India was inspired by various sources, one of which was the lives and feats of the emperors. The wonderful miniature depicting Akbar subduing a giant cobra belongs to this tradition of manuscript illustration. Its purpose was to illustrate the story of Akbar, or the Akbarnama. This type of manuscript derived ultimately from the Shahnameh, a Persian epic of the 10th–11th century. The Shahnameh and its epic of the Kingship in Islam and links the Muslim rulers to their pre-Islamic forebears. The Indian rulers continued this tradition by creating their own written histories. Akbar's grandfather produced the Baburnama, Akbar the Akbarnama, Jahangir the Jahangirnama, and Shah Jahan the Padshahnama. These works were richly illustrated by the greatest artists of the time.

The Akbarnama was written by Akbar's court historian and great friend, Abu Fazl. The emperor played an active role in its production choosing the episodes that were to be illustrated. As well, he supervised his artists' work, examining their progress regularly. More than one copy of the Akbarnama was produced over the years and this image belongs to the edition c. 1590. It has been common practice, unfortunately, over the last century or so to take Islamic manuscripts apart and to sell them piecemeal at auctions and other sales. For this reason many collections often own only parts of manuscripts and not the entire work. The miniature depicting Prince Aurangzeb in combat with a rampaging elephant (c. 1650) is another example where the skill and courage of a royal family member has been recorded. Although this image was produced prior to his succession, it clearly displays Aurangzeb as a royal personage. This image has been drawn after an actual event where Aurangzeb came to his brother, Dara Shikoh's, defense when an elephant bolted during a staged elephant fight. Shah Jahan, their father is depicted under a royal parasol to the upper left and Dara Shikoh is shown astride his horse, spear in hand, below his father. The Christian halo has been appropriated by Mughal symbolism to represent sovereignty and does not necessarily carry the Christian definition of holiness.

Miniatures were also used to illustrate fictional stories, often mystical Sufi tales full of metaphors of divine love written by great Iranian writers such as Rumi, Nizami and Sa'di. The page from the Tuti Namaz (c. 1580), or Tales of a Parrot, follows in this tradition of fictional illustration. It too, derives from a dispersed manuscript, the majority of which can be found in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, Ireland. The Tuti Namaz is a compilation of stories by the medieval Iranian writer Našabehī. In this drawing from an as-yet-unidentified portion of the text a man is seen spying upon a pair of lovers. There is a staggering amount of detail to be found in this painting. The artist has delineated each brick, depicted the individual floral motifs on the carpet, and recorded the rumpled sheets on the bed. The main influence on the work is Iranian. Contact with the Europeans was still new at this time; the first Jesuit mission did not arrive at the Mughal court until 1580. The architecture depicted, however, is Mughal. One of the favoured building materials in Mughal India was white marble and buildings often were adorned with filigreed carving. Both characteristics are discernible in this image.

Nitazmi's tale of Lolya and Majnun is an epic romance involving two star-crossed lovers unable to marry due to their different tribal backgrounds. As a result, Majnun goes into self-exile in the forest and becomes an ascetic. One miniature on display shows Lolya visiting the now-emaciated Majnun, clutched only by a loin cloth and having renounced all worldly goods. The two are surrounded by an array of beautifully drawn wild beasts. TheTuti Namaz displays European influence, likely derived from the religious imagery brought to the court by Jesuit missionaries. Her garments mirror that which typically adorns the Virgin Mary in Christian images, a dress and covering mantle. Her halo is also reminiscent of Christian images. Her ascetic and distinctive, crowded rock formations with their organic, naturalistic shapes are typical of Mughal painting as are the trees, upon which each leaf has been delineated.

The life of an ascetic as portrayed by Majnun was a respected tradition in India and often the subject of Mughal images. Two other pictures of ascetics can be viewed in this exhibition: one of Hīna the ascetic (c. 1580) and the other of two Mughal officers visiting in India (c. 1650). Akbar was strongly drawn to mysticism in addition to his wide interest in different religions. Among the subjects illustrated at his court were those applicable to religions outside of Islam such as Christianity. Hinduism and Zoroastrianism. The first of these two images, c. 1580, was done during Akbar's reign and shows a group of Shaivite devotees, a branch of mystic Hinduism. It is important to remember that the majority of the artists in the Imperial atelier were of Hindu origin; they would have been familiar with this type of subject matter. The soft contours of the figures, their modelled forms and the delicate vegetation are all characteristic of Mughal painting and not typical of Hindu art.

The later image, showing two Mughal officers approaching an ascetic and his companions, follows the same theme. This picture, however, is set at night, a pictorial convention that had become popular by the middle of the 17th century.

A wonderfully lively scene of demons feasting by a cave in the mountains shows yet another theme for Mughal miniatures. The antics of demons were a popular source of inspiration for entertaining pictures during Akbar's reign. This miniatures appearance conforms to that of the classic Mughal style: organic, vertical rock formations, distant European-inspired towns in the background, gradual recession into space, the modelling of figures and a lively, active scene. Uncoloured, or largely uncoloured, miniatures such as this were considered completed works of art and not preliminary sketches as they may have been in the Western world.
Patronage of miniatures began to diminish under the emperors succeeding Jahangir. His son and successor, Shah Jahan (1628–1656), continued being a great patron of the arts but his interest was for architecture not painting. He is responsible for one of the most famous buildings in the world, the Taj Mahal. His reign was followed by that of his third son, Aurangzeb (1658–1707), who succeeded to the throne by executing his brothers. Aurangzeb adopted a more orthodox Islamic rule than did his predecessors. His energies were spent on the economic concerns of the nation; concerns arising from the numerous successful wars. The arts suffered from less patronage and attention and this can be seen in the miniatures produced during Aurangzeb’s reign. The images tend to be flatter, more stylized and restricted in subject matter. Their backgrounds are not as full of interesting sub-topics such as fantastic mountainous landscapes populated by wild creatures, or distant towns that capture viewers’ attention. When compared with the Akbari image of the elephants being captured, the image of Aurangzeb subduing an elephant is static and restrained. It does not have the same inherent joy or celebration of art. The miniature showing ladies celebrating Diwali (c. 1675) has been infused with a greater feeling of festivity, largely drawn from the subject matter, but its large expanses of unadorned space clearly indicates its later date.

The art of Mughal India continued to decline with the emperors succeeding Aurangzeb. Their reigns were beset with wars and their capabilities were not sufficient to resuscitate the Mughal empire. The raid of the Mughal empire by the Iranian ruler Nadir Shah in 1739 effectively ended the Mughal dynasty. It remained in name, but without its strength, until the British take-over in 1857. The art produced in this period is of considerably lower quality. Two late Mughal portraits, one of a Prince with a hawk questioning 3 Yoginis and the other of Bairam Khan on horseback (both c. 1730), attempt to revive the classic Mughal style as it was under the great ruler Akbar. The images, however, lack the vitality that consumed Akbar miniatures. The images are stylized and stiff, and the colours are not the gentle, soft shades of those from 150 years previous.

The so-called “Company” paintings produced in the last years of the Mughal empire serve as important historical documents. India became part of the British Empire in 1858, and in the years leading up to this date the English East India Company gained in power throughout the country. Members of the EIC commissioned from Indian artists pictures to record the diverse cultures and regions of India. Although the ‘Company’ paintings show little of the quality or vibrancy that made imperial Mughal painting under Akbar and Jahangir some of the most celebrated paintings in the world, they are significant historically. If one compares the painting of an ascetic and his devotees (c. 1815) with the earlier imperial images, its “postcard” aspect is obvious. The sacred and the secret nature is noticeable in the space construction of art, but rather an ethnographic snapshot. This is an image for another culture to own, not an imperial commission to be displayed in the emperor’s grand albums. Neither is the dinner scene showing William Fraser in the seat of prominence surrounded by his officers and ladies (c. 1815). The Indian servants are depicted as stereotypical types as are the blank faced Europeans. There is no naturalism or individualization. The stiffness of the figures’ postures mimic the stillness with which the whole image has been painted.

The height of Mughal painting, 1580 – 1650, was one of grand imperial portraiture and sensitive genre, exciting heroine, and lyrical romantic scenes. It combined the skills of Hindu painters, the supervision of imperial masters and the techniques of European art with the sensivities of generous and encouraging patrons to create an art which exists today as a brilliant period of artistic achievement in Islamic history, and indeed world history. The patronage of Akbar and Jahangir, in particular, should be viewed on par with that of the greatest art patrons of all time. The achievements of their artists should be given no less consideration.

Label Entries

Cheney Cowles

1 A page from the Beauty Tutti-Nama c. 1580

A man and two sleeping lovers in this scene from an ancient compilation of stories called Tales of a Painted by the medieval Persian writer Ziya ud-din Nakrujhu.

These stories were among those favoured by the Mughal emperor Akbar (regned 1556 – 1605) who commissioned the manuscript about 1580. Much of it is now in Dublin, Ireland, in the Chester Beatty Library. Akbar was said to have a figure as an end of such personages as Elizabeth I of England and Raymond Hideyoji of Japan. Although Illegible, Akbar had a great love of literature and manuscript paintings and, despite his handicapped, he consolidated and greatly expanded the empire left to him by his father Humayun. The Behisms were quelled, an effective gov- ernmental system and bureaucracy formed, and a novel theory of rulership created. This empire would endure largely in the form if not size into which Akbar had moulded it until its facto absorption into the British Empire by the late 18th century.

2 An illustration from the Akbar-Nama c. 1590

The young emperor Akbar (regned 1556 – 1605) sub-

This is a new comic which has emerged from a different cause—one of many heroic deeds attributed to the emperors of this magnificence. This landscape with twisting rocks, woodland and busy figures typifies the dynamic spirit of many paintings of the time, and was part of the Akbar-Nama chronicles of Akbar’s reign.

Most of the paintings’ artistic origin lies in Persian art. Many Persian Safavid painters and calligraphers attracted to the wealthy and powerful Mughal court in the 16th and 17th centuries. Their sophisticated artistic methods were modified by tastes prevailing in the Indian Subcontinent, however, and distinctively Indianized styles soon appeared. One such distinctive compositional source for these Persian Safavid painters was probably Chinese commercial landscape painting of the Yuan and Ming dynasties. Dotted and contoured cliffs and rocks and the use of lying perspective serve as markers for this influence. The Mughal Nahaj in both painting style and techniques, of course, differed radically from any Chinese prototypes.

3 Hindu ascetics by a fire. c. 1590

The Mughal emperor Akbar was deeply religious and had distinct mystical leanings. Although officially Mus- lim, he was interested in all religions as well as in the various aspects of the lives of his subjects whether they were Hindu, Muslim, Jain or Christian.

Many drawings and paintings of various types of religious and mystical activities were produced for Akbar’s court. Among them were debates with Jesuit missionaries, portraits of fairs or wanderers and even depictions of Hindu deities.

This drawing depicts Shaivite deities and their disciplines. Despite the Hindu subject matter, these re- mains a typical Persian-Safavid aspect to it, as can be seen in the small area of rocky hillocks in the upper left-hand corner.

4 Demons banqueting in a fantastic landscape. c. 1590

This and other drawings from the late 16th and early 17 centurey Mughal court were intended as finished works of art and not just as elaborative preparatory sketches.

A number of drawings and paintings of demons feasting were produced during the emperor Akbar’s reign. They show an amazing mix of humour and horror, fixed in the complex and emergent figures favoured by the monarch.

Whether any of the distinctive faces illustrated are caricatures of person known to the artist or the court is an interesting question.

5 Capturing wild elephants. late 16th century

Elephants trumpet and struggle, horses screaming and men shouting in this drawing of an elephant hunt. Even in this rather small drawing, Akbar’s taste for lively and dramatic subject matter is evident. Inclusion of some of the figures below the class of courtier and prince is a feature of a number of works from this reign. While such lesser folk were never given the prominence of a prince, their activities would be real- istic painted or drawn in many works showing multitudinous aspects of life in Akbar’s new empire.

6 Persian youth holding an arrow

Showing close affinities with painting in Safavid Persia and in the Muslim courts of central India, this small portrait may be by Muhammad ‘Abd. He was active at the Mughal court at the beginning of the 17th century.

7 Prince Parsv, c. 1610

Prince Parsv (1598 – 1626) was the second son of the emperor Jahangir (regned 1605 – 1627). He is shown here holding a jeweled staff, probably a symbol of power. Perched on his finger, in the upper left-hand corner depicts an old man holding a staff and cloth bag and backed by a large sun. It was added later to this portrait, perhaps as early as 1660.

8 Layla visits Majnun, late 16th century

The romantic melancholy tale of Layla and Majnun is of Persian origin. The two, who were from different tribes, fell in love and were forbidden to marry or even have any contact. Layla was eventually abandoned and Majnun’s face was burned into the earth. The novel has been written in various languages and has been adapted into many film and television shows. It is a story of love that transcends all boundaries and is a timeless tale of true love.

9 Landscape with Minarets and a bridge. c. 1600

The Mughal artist employed a variety of techniques to create the illusion of space and depth. The bridge in the foreground is a typical Mughal element, and the minarets in the background create a sense of height and grandeur. The use of light and shadow is also evident, creating a sense of realism. The artist's use of perspective and the careful attention to detail in the landscape create a feeling of immersion in the scene, making it appear as if the viewer is standing in the midst of the landscape.
9 Mughal officers visiting an ascetic at night, mid-17th century

Paintings depicting ascetics and mortals were popular at court from the reigns of Akbar through that of Shah Jahan. By the mid-17th century, the date of this work, night scenes had become fashionable subjects well. Here two military figures visit an ascetic in a courtyard near a village. A court artist named Payag was the most accomplished artist among these types of moody scenes. The Mughal emperor Shah Jahan appears as an ascetic figure, a retinue of monks and nuns are watching their lord's visitation. The visitors are depicted as fleeing from their camp to a nearby village by night, seeking to homage to a prominent religious figure.

10 Jahangir with a falcon

The emperor Jahangir (reigned 1605–1627) was a great connoisseur of the arts and during his years in power supported a number of artists whose individual stylistic qualities he admired. He was a sharp observer of the natural world. Court paintings of animals, birds and plants of unsupervised quality were executed for Jahangir's highly developed taste. This portrait was made by Bishan Das (active 1615–1650), a Hind ß who began service at Akbar's court then rose to great favour in that of Jahangir. He was even sent on an important diplomatic mission to Persia in 1613 where he made portraits of Shah Abbas and other Safavid court figures. Analogous to this portrait shell be the work of (layat), another court artist who specialized in animal depictions during Jahangir's reign.

11 A prince, ladies and courtiers

In an encampment

Much of the prince's life was spent away from the empire's palatial cities and forts usually on military campaigns but also on outings in the countryside. Here he is seen with his new favourite while a woman no longer of romantic interest has collapsed in a faint on the deck. Various males look on with expressions of subdued irony, perhaps having observed similar embarrassing scenes before. This work dates from the reign of Shah Jahan (1628–1658). Another version of this painting survives in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin.

12 Prince Aurangzeb attacking an amok elephant

This drawing with blue ink colours depicts a real event, when Prince Aurangzeb defended his brother Dara Shikoh from an elephant which had run amok during a safari elephant hunt. The third son of Shah Jahan, Aurangzeb as prince was considered the ideal candidate for the throne. His older brother Dara Shikoh (1615–1656) appeared to be the emperor's favourite, however the Mughals had no fixed system in Persia it was up for power upon the death of each emperor.

In Aurangzeb's case, war for succession began in 1657, well ahead of schedule, after Shah Jahan became ill and Dara's brothers feared he would make himself the emperor. Aurangzeb was the most hated of the brothers. He imprisoned his father and, in 1659, crushed Dara's forces and executed him. Two other brothers were killed in 1660 and 1661. Aurangzeb reigned until 1707, during that time engaging in expansionist wars to the south. He was a strict Moslem, which meant that the mythic economic and social fault lines within the Mughal empire began to be interpreted in religious terms in his lifetime. Aurangzeb's adherents were much harder to retain, and the field either fighting to expand the empire or quelling rebellions. Aurangzeb was able to imagine these conflicts and less shifting away from their camp to a nearby village by night, seeking to homage to a prominent religious figure.
23 Page of poetry in Nasta’liq, c. 1600

Despite its literacy, the Mughal emperor Akbar enjoyed calligraphy and had pages of it incorporated into albums. One of his favourite calligraphers, Muhammad Husayn al-Raschid, who was called Zafir Qasim or Golden Pen, executed this page.

24 Page with calligraphy on marbled paper, early 17th century

Marbled papers had a variety of uses in the Islamic world. In India they were used often as backgrounds for decorative calligraphy. Five lines of nasta’liq were written diagonally on this Mughal example.

25 Shamsa and opening page from a book of Persian poetry, early 17th century

A shamsa, or sunburst, served as the frontispiece of an album of paintings or calligraphy and contained a central seal or name, in this case effaced. This shamsa and the page of decorative nasta’liq calligraphy are very closely related to Safavid Persian models. Assuming they are Mughal, both would be the work of a Persian working at the Mughal court or of someone trained in Persia.

26 Shamsa

This shamsa was executed in three stages: the first in the late 16th century with the blue and coloured eight-pointed device in the centre. In about 1630, the green and gold arabesques were drawn and then the coloured floral scroll border was added about 25 years later when this shamsa became the first page of an album for Shah Jahan.

The term in nasta’liq was added by the English governor general of Bombay in 1937.

27 Firman of Shah Jahan, 1636–1637

In seven lines of nasta’liq calligraphy, the emperor Shah Jahan (reigned 1627–1658) instructs his favorite son Dara Shikoh to raise the rank of an officer and report back on events in the Deccan. It bears the imperial seal and a calligraphic device in gold and red called a tugra in Turkish. Such formal letters were written by scribes and not by the emperors themselves.

Dara Shikoh lost a war for succession with prince Aurangzeb who engineered a coup before Shah Jahan’s death. Dara Shikoh was killed in 1659 on Aurangzeb’s orders.

28 Page from an album commissioned by Shah Jahan

Shah Jahan and other Mughal emperors had albums assembled to include calligraphy and paintings. Borders were illuminated to help unify the elements of an imperial album which did not necessarily have a theme or subject running throughout.

Later histories of many imperial albums reflect the rocky path of world history. Persian under Nadir Shah sacked the Mughal capital of Delhi in 1739, removing books as well as Shah Jahan’s famous peacock throne and vast quantities of gems. A few of these albums came to Russia in the 19th and early 20th centuries by gift or purchase from Iran and Iraq. Czarist armies were moving the Russian empire’s borders southward throughout those years and the crown actively assembled books of all kinds from the Islamic world for research purposes as well as in admiration of their artistic qualities. Many more beautiful albums went to England, naturally, as that nation was the virtually exclusive colonial power in the Subcontinent in the 16th century. Other albums appeared in Paris where they were bought by such 18th century connoisseurs as Henri Vever.

29 Firman of Shah Alam II, 1759–1760 (1073 AH)

Shah Alam II declared himself Mughal emperor in 1759 upon the assassination of his father by the prime minister. It took years for him to take Delhi, however, and even then he was without real power in most of the Subcontinent.

The lavish illumination in this work contrasts sharply with Shah Jahan’s firmans.

30 Page of Shikasta script

Shikasta, or broken script, is said to have evolved within governmental circles but it found full development among poets in India and Persia. It was meant to be enjoyed more for beauty than legibility. The evocative nature of the script is implied and it was favored among the Indian composers of love verse.

This example is dated 1774 and was executed by Fagh Shah Muhammad Moin of Hyderabad.

31 Four pages from a Deccani manuscript, 18th century

Names and invocations were inscribed into pictorial forms in various parts of the Islamic world. Despite their superficially lifelike appearance such forms (as does one here) often contain the names of Muhammad, Ali, Hasan, and Husayn and therefore carry a religious meaning.

Molding various Arabic scripts into abstract decorative forms has a long history. Such devices can be found on memento early buildings and metalwork as well as manuscripts. Pictorial forms were popular only later, in the 18th and 19th centuries. These pages were produced in Hyderabad in the 18th century. Pictorial calligraphic devices were very popular in 18th century Turkey.