

ART HISTORY – TERM PAPER

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## **POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS ART AND ARCHITECTURE**

### **(MUGHAL DYNASTY)**

Location: Indian sub-continent

Time: 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century

The Mughal Dynasty was a Muslim empire established in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and ruled the Indian sub-continent for almost two decades. The word “Mughal” is the Persian and Arabic word of “Mongol” and was established by Babur, a direct descendant of Genghis Khan. His successor, Nasruiddin Humayun, expanded the frontiers of the empire, however, was soon driven into exile from the land and returned in 1555 but died a year later. It was in the reign of Jalaluddin Akbar that the empire saw true success and growth. Akbar conquered and established domain over northern and central India and many other territories.

It was also under his reign that art practices increased in the continent, establishing a strong cultural practice of portraiture, and was also the first Mughal patron of the arts of the books. These books were called, “chronicles” which were commissioned by Mughal kings to write accounts of the emperor’s life and the empire. In “Kings and Chronicles: The Mughal Courts” by Najaf Haider mentions that “these texts were intended as conveyers of meanings that the Mughal rulers sought to impose on their domain.” (224) The chronicles served as a reminder to those who resisted under the emperor’s power that they were bound to fail. However, these accounts also served to “project a vision of an enlightened kingdom to all those that came under its umbrella.” (225) The Mughal emperors thought of themselves as appointed by Divine Will to be rulers of a large empire. This theme of rulers thinking themselves to be apostles of God

continues from previous centuries as seen in Christian art and architecture. Paintings that accompanied these chronicles presented the emperors wearing a halo, as was the tradition of European paintings of Christ to symbolize the light of God. For example, in the painting by Abu'l Hasan shows Jahangir holding a portrait of his father, Akbar. Akbar, in the portrait, is dressed in white which in Sufi tradition symbolized the enlightened soul. There is a halo surrounding in depiction of both the son and the father suggesting that they are of divine descent and given power by God himself. The white is contrasted with the darker colors making Akbar stand out even more as different. Moreover, Jahangir is depicted wearing majestic clothing and covered in jewels. This painting not only presents their divine status but also serves to reinforce their powerful status as authority appointed by God itself and which should be adhered to by everyone under their domain. Even though these paintings were serving as reminder for their power, they were also a source of constant conflict between the state and the *ulama* – representative of Muslim values. According to the *ulama*, paintings like these were in direct opposition to Prophet Muhammad's hadith where he forbade depiction of human beings in a realistic manner as it would suggest that the "artist was appropriating the power of creation which belonged only to God." (229) In another painting in the 'Akbarnama' depicts the emperor on an elephant chasing an equally fierce elephant who leads them on a chase across the river. The emperor is shown as the picture of perfect ease on the elephant, poised and unfazed. He is shown as the personification of a figure of great strength and power, having command not only in the natural world but also in the divine world. Elephant in Indian culture is seen as a symbol of majestic power and strength and the emperor having control of it represents his own status of a powerful authority. It was known that the emperor Akbar himself took great interest in making of these portraits in different styles and we can see a blend of cultural practices. His preference of

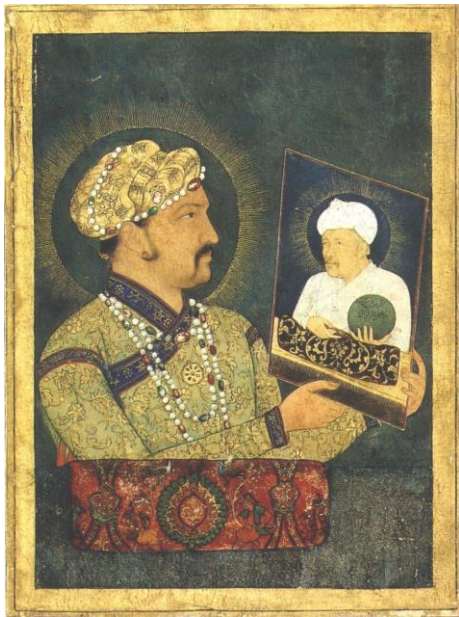
showing personal qualities. Both the paintings show the emperor's power in the natural world and also in the divine world.

This combining of religious authority with administrative authority continues when Jahangir becomes the successor to his father's throne. In a painting, "Bichitr, Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings", the emperor takes the chance to immortalize himself. He is painted as the largest figure seated on a platform elevated above. A larger, dark disc of gold surrounds his head displaying his divine authority. He is clad in majestic clothing and the difference between the rich jewellery adorning his hands compared to that of the Sufi Shaikh accepting the gift shows his spiritual authority. The angels painted beneath the emperor's seat write an inscription in Persian – "O Shah, May the Span of Your Life be a Thousand Years" which is an allegorical reference to the passage of time. The angel being an iconographic figure in European art. This further illustrates the emperor's leanings in spiritual and imperial worlds.

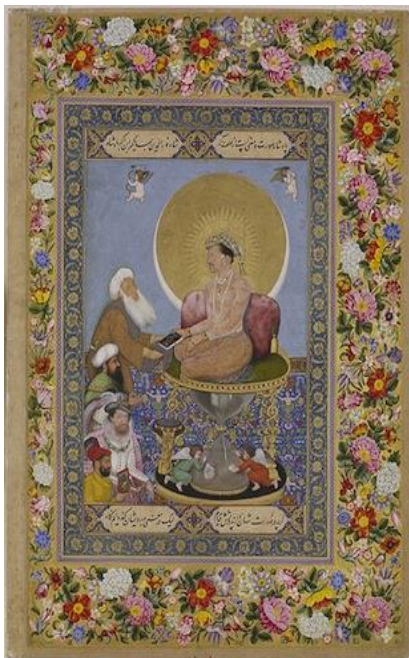
It was in the era of Shah Jahan, son of Jahangir, that there was an increase in the architectural contributions to the empire. Shah Jahan inherited great wealth and splendor while coming to throne in a time when various jewels were being mined from India. According to Haider, "Shah Jahan accumulated enough money to indulge his passion for building....It was the most visible and tangible sign of dynastic power, wealth, and prestige. In the case of Muslim rulers it was also considered an act of piety" (236) Monuments like Humayun's tomb, Fatehpur Sikri and Taj Mahal have become iconic structures of the Mughal dynasty. In his article, "An Imperial Mughal Tent and Mobile Sovereignty in Eighteenth Century Jodhpur" by Zirwat Chowdhary writes that the architecture of 17<sup>th</sup> century in different cities across the sub-continent each became a site of fixity, imperial rule and a "site of sovereignty". (669) "The seventeenth-century architecture of Delhi – especially the jharoka windows (overhanging balconies or oriel windows), audience

halls, and processional plan of the Red Fort – served to foreground the body of the emperor as a site of sovereignty through choreographed, ceremonial displays to his subjects.” (669) One of the most remarkable monuments is the *Taj Mahal* built by Shah Jahan for his wife who he named ‘Mumtaz Mahal’. *Taj Mahal* is distinct in its vast structure, lavish gardens and use of marble and red stone. The interior plan of the building is in eight levels which is a reference to the eight levels of Paradise. The structure is in a cross-axial plan which is pertaining to particular Islamic structural space used in mosques. There are inscriptions into the building walls that are Quranic verses. The use of white marble and red stone combined is a reference to ancient Hindu texts where white was the color of purity and red was the color of brevity. *Taj Mahal* is popularly considered as a symbol of love for his wife, however, it can possibly be also a physical representation of a divine throne and the structure was built as a house of paradise to dignify the emperor himself and his imperial rule. In his article, Chowdhary discusses the *Lal Dera* built by the Maharaja of Jodhpur as implementing some elements of Mughal court as a symbol of power and sovereignty. “In the early days of the empire the imperial tent and camp served the needs of a mobile court.” (669) The use of materials to built the *Lal Dera* suggested influences from the Mughal court. “Both inner and outer colonnades have cusped arches reminiscent of the kind popular in buildings from the reign of Shah Jahan, such as the Diwan-I‘Amm at the Red Fort.” (671) The tent symbolizes the status of the emperor not only in his authority but also of his divinely status. The tent using to create the presence of a Muslim ruler dates back in Islamic history where the ruler of Mecca sends a cloth to cover the Ka’bah, “in an uninhabited tent called the *Mahmal*, thereby transferring his presence unto the materiality of the tent itself.” (671) Thus, the significance of the imperial tent is not only limited to this world but transcends to a higher level.

In a combination of art and architecture in the Mughal era, there is a constant notion of the ruling authority viewing themselves as appointed by God to rule and conquer this material world. Their glorification of their selves is depicted through subtle or grand gestures in art and established architectures. Each one carrying a symbolization of monarchical and saintly power.



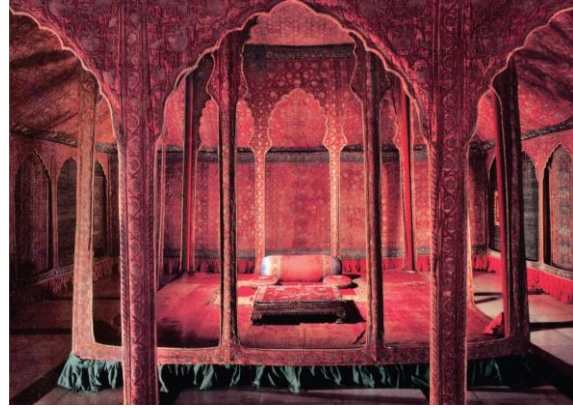
Basawan and Chetar, "Akbar" (detail) from the Akbarnama, c. 1586-89, Mughal Empire, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 33 x 30 cm (Victoria and Albert Museum, London)



Bichitr, *Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings* from the "St. Petersburg Album," 1615-1618, opaque watercolor, gold and ink on paper, 18 x 25.3 cm (Freer | Sackler: The Smithsonian's Museums of Asian Art)



Taj Mahal, Agra, India, 1632-53 (photo: Mathew Knott. CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



*Lal Dera* or 'Red Tent', late seventeenth to early eighteenth century. Embroidered silk velvet, 4 × 7.5 × 7.5 m. Jodhpur: Mehrangarh Fort Museum.

#### CITATIONS:

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