

Muslim and Hindu Art (after ca. A.D. 1500)

In the early eleventh century, the first large numbers of Muslims began to raid India from Ghazna in Afghanistan. In the subcontinent, Muslims encountered an ancient civilization whose peoples worshipped the powers and perfection of the gods in idealized human forms and, though of different faiths, managed to coexist peacefully. Turko-Afghan invasions continued through the twelfth century and the first Muslim kingdom in India, the Delhi Sultanate, was proclaimed in 1206. Buddhism, which had gradually lost adherents in India, seems to have been dealt a deathblow when Muslim invaders destroyed the great Buddhist monastery-universities in northeast India. Although many Hindu temples were destroyed as well, the Hindu faith continued to be the religion of most Indians.

The Muslim invaders brought new forms of architecture and art rooted in Persian court traditions. Artistic creativity resurfaced under the patronage of Muslim and Hindu royal courts, and the greatest achievements shifted from the religious to the secular realm. The major Indian art forms, sculpture and figural reliefs, gave way to painting and architecture. However, human and animal figures continued to be the main subjects of “miniature paintings,” that is, pages from illustrated books and folios.

Content and Function: Court Art

The Art of the Book

The holy book of the Muslims, the Qur’an, was often adorned with beautiful calligraphy, geometric patterns, and vegetal designs. The depiction of humans and animals was taboo. However, the production of elaborate illustrated books was the hallmark of a sophisticated Islamic court. Particularly in Persia, books about the adventures of mythic heroes were filled with remarkable scenes of humans and animals created for the enjoyment of the king and his courtiers. Muslim invaders brought this art of the book to the courts of South Asia, along with the use of paper, which gradually replaced flattened and cut palm leaves for writing and painting.

image 30

The Hindu (Rajput) courts made unbound manuscripts of traditional texts, while the Mughals created bound volumes that included not only Muslim subjects and historical texts but also, under the early Mughal emperor Akbar, great Hindu epics (image 30). Although imperial book commissions continued throughout the seventeenth century, illustrations of everyday life became popular as well, including portraits of court officials, harem scenes, and realistic depictions of animals and flowers. The Hindu courts were influenced by these trends, particularly in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, when a number of Mughal artists departed the imperial ateliers to seek work at Rajput courts.

Textiles

image 35

Since ancient times India has been famous for fabrics. Greek and Roman texts mention the luxurious and finely woven cottons of Benares. These textiles are called “muslins” in tribute to their place of origin. Ikat weaves and permanently dyed cottons (chintzes) are equally ancient textile techniques (image 35). The weaving of pile carpets, however, was not native to India. In the hot and often damp climate, a heavy floor covering was deemed unnecessary and impractical. Muslims introduced the technique in the fifteenth century, but it was Akbar (r. 1556–1605) who first established pile carpet weaving as a royal art. He had become accustomed to their use and to their rich patterns and colors during his stay at the Persian court before his conquest of northern India (image 33).

image 33

Palace Decor

It is from the Muslim kingdoms of India that we have the earliest surviving stone palaces. Inset stones, tiles, and openwork windows (poster B and drawing of a *jali* on page 56) decorated walls, fountain courtyards, domes of palaces, and the homes of wealthy court officials. Doors, shutters, and paneling of walls and ceilings were carved and inlaid in geometric and vegetal patterns. Furniture was sparse. People sat on pillows or low settees, and slept in bedding on the floor. The only pieces of wood furniture were storage chests and collapsible stands supporting metal trays from which people dined.

Personal Art Objects

image 32

image 37

It was a tradition in the Mughal and Rajput courts to give elaborate gifts to impress and gain favor at court. Giving beautiful, skillfully made objects that could be held or worn advertised the refined taste of the donor, another way to advance one’s position at court. The most treasured possessions, and therefore the most prized gifts, were jewels (image 32), bejeweled daggers and turban ornaments, fancifully designed containers made of precious materials for food and drink, incense, jewelry, perfume and water for bathing, writing implements, and hunting equipment (image 37). At the biannual weighing ceremony of the Mughal emperor, his weight in gold and silver, made from gifts by his courtiers and subjects, would be distributed to holy men and the poor. The emperor, in exchange, bestowed costly personal objects on his favored princes, ambassadors, and officials.

Religious Art

The Mosque and Calligraphy

Inspired by Persian architecture, the Muslim sultanates constructed mosques using the arch and dome, building techniques that were unknown in India. These rounded shapes were set within rectangular walls in harmonious and balanced geometrical arrangements. Interiors and exteriors were decorated with traditional Islamic geometric and floral patterns, based on geometric principles believed to reflect God’s order in the universe. These patterns can also be interpreted as a way of visualizing God’s infinite pow-

ers, since many of them can be repeated endlessly in all directions (see the *jali* drawing on page 56). The most important decorative element was Arabic calligraphy, which perpetuates God's words to Muhammad.

The most famous Mughal religious structure, the Taj Mahal, is not a mosque but a tomb. Built by Emperor Shah Jahan for his wife, it includes a small mosque in its walled enclosure. From a distance the measured geometric architectural shapes and their symmetrical arrangement evoke harmony and grandeur. Closer up, the white marble walls are seen to be inlaid with beautiful calligraphy and delicate patterns of semiprecious stones representing flowers.

Formal Elements of the Art

Styles of Painting

image 29

Although mural paintings are known to have decorated the walls of palaces and mansions, few survive. However, secular manuscripts dating from the sixteenth century onward are extant. The indigenous Rajput painting style favored flat areas of bright color, shallow space, and decorative patterning to depict timeless events (image 29). In contrast, Mughal painting featured greater naturalism and a sense of deeper space, and portrayed both historical scenes and mythic events. Figures are individualized through lively expressions, gestures, and poses. Realistic details of costume, adornment, personal possessions, architecture, gardens, and animals abound. Colors are nuanced. This interest in naturalism was fueled by the prints and paintings brought to the court by European merchants and missionaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Exposed to new ways of depicting the world, Mughal painters experimented with modeling in light and shadow and other European techniques such as perspective to create the illusion of volume and depth.

image 30

Mughal painting evolved during the reigns of the three greatest Mughal emperors. Akbar (r. 1556–1605) commissioned illustrated dynastic histories and translations of Hindu classics into Persian (image 30). The artists of Jahangir's court (r. 1605–27) gratified the emperor's taste for individual portrait studies of birds, animals (image 31), flowers, and members of his court. Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58) shared this interest in lifelike portraits, especially of the royal family and court members (image 32), and resumed his grandfather's interest in history painting.

image 31

image 32

As Mughal power and patronage waned in the late seventeenth century, some court painters were drawn to the many small Rajput kingdoms. They began to develop increasingly distinct artistic styles. Some drew inspiration from Mughal art, adopting its naturalism, deeper space, more varied colors, and subject matter. Others produced paintings inspired by the indigenous Rajput love of bright color, shallow space, expressive gesture, and mythic subject matter. Still others synthesized elements of both.

In the nineteenth century, this profusion of styles, at first vivid and exciting, seemed at a loss for inspiration in the face of India's changing world. Painting ateliers declined, as the British preferred to build elaborate palaces, and

the advent of photography to record royal events further undermined the traditional role of painting at the courts.

Pattern

Pattern—floral and geometric—is another distinctive feature of court art, whether spread across a wall, on a book cover or border of an album leaf, around a dagger hilt, or on a carpet. With straight edge and compass, artists created geometric patterns of intersecting circles upon which they drew grids of equilateral triangles and squares (see drawing of the jali on page 56). These in turn could be elaborated into polygons and stars. Vines, leaves, and blossoms grew out of each other in continuous curving patterns. In the Mughal period, these floral designs became more and more realistic, so that many flowers could be identified (image 32).

image 32

Color

In the royal art of many cultures, colors are strong and bold. In India, surfaces both large and small—architecture, clothing, and personal art—were enriched with bright color, especially reds and brilliant blues (image 39 and poster B). There was also an appreciation of the softer, subtler colors of jade.

image 39; poster B

Colors in patterns were combined to create the rich floral and geometric designs found in Mughal textiles and carpets (image 33). Color in miniature painting was at first fanciful and jewel-like—blue rocks, for instance, and lavender horses—as in the Persian court style. In the early Rajput style, a limited number of colors were used with little attempt at naturalism (image 29). In Mughal painting, color became increasingly naturalistic, although artists also used them to lead one's eye through detailed scenes of court crowds, battles, and hunting so favored by the Mughals.

image 33

image 29

Surfaces

Muslim and Hindu patrons delighted in sumptuous polished surfaces: the glisten of gold, silver, and other metals, the reflective qualities of polished gems and stones such as jade and rock crystal, and the sheen of silks and ivory (image 37). Another favored way to enrich surfaces was the technique of inlay, in which materials such as ivory and shell were set into wood, and gold and silver into darker metal surfaces.

image 37

The same formal elements—rich geometric and vegetal patterns, rich colors, and rich materials—were applied to architecture, textiles, ceramics, metalwork, and stone, stucco, and wood carvings. No distinction existed between what is called fine art in Western cultures and the decorative arts.