

## AESTHETIC HYBRIDITY IN MUGHAL PAINTING, 1526–1658

The first specialized critical-aesthetic study to be published on the concept of hybridity in early Mughal painting, this book investigates the workings of the diverse creative forces that led to the formation of a unique Mughal pictorial language. Mughal pictoriality distinguishes itself from the Persianate models through the rationalization of the picture's conceptual structure and other visual modes of expressions involving the aesthetic concept of mimesis. If the stylistic and iconographic results of this transformational process have been well identified and evidenced, their hermeneutic interpretation greatly suffers from the neglect of a methodologically updated investigation of the images' conceptual underlying. Valerie Gonzalez addresses this lacuna by exploring the operations of cross-fertilization at the level of imagistic conceptualization resulting from the multifaceted encounter between the local legacy of Indo-Persianate book art, the freshly imported Persian models to Mughal India after 1555 and the influx of European art at the Mughal court in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The author's close examination of the visuality, metaphysical order and aesthetic language of Mughal imagery and portraiture sheds new light on this particular aspect of its aesthetic hybridity, which is usually approached monolithically as a historical phenomenon of cross-cultural interaction. That approach fails to consider specific parameters and features inherent to the artistic practice, such as the differences between doxis and praxis, conceptualization and realization, intentionality and what lies beyond it. By studying the distinct phases and principles of hybridization between the variegated pictorial sources at work in the Mughal creative process at the successive levels of the project/intention, the practice/realization and the result/product, the author deciphers the modalities of appropriation and manipulation of the heterogeneous elements. Her unique use of primary sources combined with contemporary aesthetic-philosophical critical material, in particular phenomenology, sustains her re-definition of Mughal painting's ontology, cognitivity and semantics.

*Valerie Gonzalez is an expert on Islamic art history and aesthetics. She teaches Islamic studies at the Leighton House Museum, London. She was previously a member of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University, USA.*

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# Aesthetic Hybridity in Mughal Painting, 1526–1658

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Valerie Gonzalez

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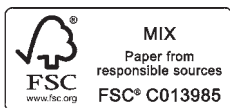
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*To my daughter, Elah, my husband, Amihay, and my father, Pierre*

*In memory of my mother, Annie, and Oleg Grabar*



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With all my heart I express infinite gratitude to my family, always present at my side. My mother passed away and this book is an homage to her. This book is also dedicated to my husband, Amihay, my father, Pierre, and especially to my little girl, Elah, who had to comply with the unfairness of her mummy's diminished availability in the cause of this book.

I will close with praise for the scientific community of theoretical physicists, my husband's professional milieu, many of whom are from India, Iran, and other countries with an Islamic history. They too have given me heartening support as they expressed interest in my research and this book, in their own way naturally, with their sharp inquisitive sense and the lucid detachment of high intelligence and pure curiosity.

I could not have imagined nor wished for a better boost.

## Preface

When I began to study Mughal and Persian painting in 2007, I embarked on a solitary adventure; previously, I had studied different Islamic arts such as metalwork, architecture, and calligraphy, mostly from the Arab world. In academic circles, so often attached to narrowly defined specializations, this move could only seem unorthodox. Therefore, initially I did not get much encouragement.

Yet pictorial art has always been the most familiar form of artistic expression to me. I practiced it for several years professionally after having been trained in The School of Fine Arts of Marseille-Luminy, France, from which I obtained an MFA. Indeed, apart from my university education in art history and Islamic studies, I have had an education in studio art, contemporary artistic creation, and art theory. I truly believe this experience constitutes a valuable preparation for examining and interpreting pictorial objects. I remember reading a similar observation by James Elkins, the art historian and critic from the Art Institute in Chicago, who also “came to art history from the practice,” so to speak. He remarked that having touched, smelled, and manipulated materials to create art allowed him to comprehend art as no other hermeneutic practice or training could. In his opinion, art historians lack this experience.

In addition to direct visceral contact with the materiality of painting, the constant questioning and thinking that preside over the manipulation of paint and media enable one to better penetrate forms and grasp their language. It is my hope that I have been able to use this asset to illuminate Mughal painting. Actually, studying this material had long been part of my scholarly agenda. I had been waiting for the appropriate time to begin this project. As I began to travel to East and South Asia doing fieldwork, the time had come. Living in London for nearly five years also helped, given the richness of the collections in the United Kingdom and neighboring Ireland.

I had already published an article which is a monograph on a famous Mughal group portrait featuring Jahangir exhibited in the Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC. But as my research on this material progressed, I became

aware of the need to open the study of painting in Islam generally to other more promising horizons, therefore I decided to gather all my thoughts and findings in the wider more substantial space of a book. Early Mughal painting indeed constitutes this work's central subject but it also contains substantial portions dedicated to Persian and Sultanate book art. Furthermore, I significantly expand the scope of this study to theoretical discussions and methodological propositions addressing how to think about and look at these pictorial complexities from a global perspective, taking a genuinely interdisciplinary and transcultural approach. This endeavor is reflected in the unusual organization of this book, which bestows as much space to theory and critique of existing studies as to the object of inquiry itself.

Finally, this book intends to address not only experts in Mughal painting, from whom I expect resistance, but also, importantly, a wide-ranging audience of scholars, artists, writers, and thinkers who are simply interested in pictorial expression in Islam or are more broadly versed in art hermeneutics.

Valerie Gonzalez  
Paris, April 25, 2014

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## Introduction

Anything be it beautiful or ugly, dignified or despicable, dreadful or of a pleasing appearance, deep or deformed, object or non-object, whatever it be, could be transformed in to *rasa* [aesthetic experience] by an artist's imagination and skill.

*The Citrasutra (Book of Painting)*

### To Begin, a Few Thoughts

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, James Joyce said something no one should construe as obvious: "By thinking of things, you could understand them."<sup>1</sup> Similarly, one could also say, by thinking of artworks, you could understand them.<sup>2</sup> It is not intended as merely a clever pun with which to begin this book. Rather, this is a reminder that the meaning of artistic complexities primarily dwells within them, so that despite the many ways one might devise to retrieve their meanings, one will not succeed without thinking of them intensively and systematically. The discipline of art history, from its inception, has aimed to provide observers with the ability to gain access to an artwork's core, seizing its essence and substance. This evolution of the practice of art history gave rise to interdisciplinarity, through which archaeologists and art historians could benefit from the works of critics, theorists, philosophers, artists-writers, poets and writers, and even scientists. But not all art histories have followed this trajectory nor adhered to this research philosophy's epistemic innovations and pragmatics, indeed originally springing from the reflection on Western and Modern and contemporary art. Many area and period studies have preferred to preserve the old manner of making art history, based on the idea that this critical methodology is inapt for the material concerned, either anachronistic for the productions of the past or unfitting and out of place for non-Western cultural contexts. These conservative approaches restrict the practice of art history to the established

methods of contextualization and history, focused on evidencing and preferring to stick to original primary sources while avoiding the theoretical reflection perceived as irrelevant to the objects and their context.

This traditional protocol tends to prevail in the field of Islamic art studies, to which belongs the history of Mughal painting, the subject of this book.<sup>3</sup> This is not without consequences. This state of affairs, concerning such great artistic complexities as Mughal and Persianate book art in general, signifies a blockage to further progress of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> To put things in perspective, it is as if we were content with discussing Velasquez's *Las Meninas* solely on the basis of the history of Spanish painting, the figures' identities and social significance, and the painting's Spanish political-religious context, and omitted delving into the philosophical, aesthetic, and metaphysical dimensions of the painting. How could one pretend to understand this work without grasping that it talks as much about the period's Spanish court and society as about the art of painting itself, that the rough back of the huge canvas is as meaningful as the *infanta* Margarita's face, and that beyond offering a specimen of the Baroque pictorial art of Spain's Golden Age, *Las Meninas* constitutes a conceptual statement on the objecthood of images, a phenomenological demonstration on the act of gazing under all its dialectical aspects, a reflection on the aesthetic ontology of space in fiction, on reality and virtuality, on the seen and the unseen, the visible, the non-visible, and the invisible in representation, and yet many other things.<sup>5</sup>

But some would say that evoking *Las Meninas* in the framework of studying a Persianate production is irrelevant because of the Spanish picture's uniqueness, its exceptional level of cognitivity regarding these purely aesthetic matters; and last, not trivially, because it is quintessentially European. Precisely these properties of Velasquez's masterpiece owe their value and exceptionality to their transcendental scope beyond their ipseity. What they teach and show applies to prehistoric San (Bushmen) rock painting in South Africa as well as to Mughal and Persian painting or the murals of San Francisco or Tehran, ultimately all artistic complexities in their own right. Therefore, quite the contrary, *Las Meninas*, and any global artwork of analogous magnitude, offers an utterly relevant and exemplifying reference to underscore the necessity of scrutinizing with thinker's eyes any object of aesthetic elaboration from any provenance.

I'd like to make two important points about this book.

First, I totally assume the choice of my critical models and references, which by no means exclusively but certainly unequivocally come from Western culture, although I use them to illuminate non-Western artistic creations. I have a European cultural and educational background; therefore, by nature and culture I am inclined to appropriate intellectual and artistic products of this extraction. I do not see this as a problem as long as these products effectively serve the inquiry and as long as the subject's inner essence and

original context is not lost from sight and the hermeneutic work is not affected by ethnocentrism or culturocentrism. Of course, this is valid for any art historian of any national identity willing to implement a similar transcultural method of art history with models of his or her choice.

Second, the evocation of Velasquez's famous picture has underlined an unfair asymmetry this book aims to reduce or rectify to the extent possible. Mughal painting, like pictorial art in the Muslim world generally, has not received the critical and philosophical attention it deserves as much as its Western counterparts, nor as much flexibility in the choices of perspectives and hermeneutic techniques.<sup>6</sup> It should be possible and legitimate to look at and talk about Persianate painting with the same intellectual depth and sensitive aesthetic attention that is applied to the works of Leonardo da Vinci, Marcel Duchamp, or Jackson Pollock, or as Michel Foucault famously did with *Las Meninas* in *The Order of Things*.<sup>7</sup> With this study I intend to insert the non-Western artifacts I analyze among the great subjects of reflection in the sphere of international pictorial art past and present, as was done relatively recently for Chinese painting, for example. The first word of this book's title, "aesthetic," is above all a declaration of this project and a clear signal of its epistemic inscription in the critical inquiry.

A project of this nature, however, could not be carried out without addressing the epistemological problems it raises in the framework of Islamic art studies. This explains the division of this book into two parts and the unusual size of Part I, dedicated to conceptual deconstructions and theoretical intimations. Part I provides the necessary buttresses to the essays in Part II, and aims to challenge persistent outmoded parameters of knowledge and to propose new research modalities for a scholarly field in need of reform.

### **Part I: Conceptual Constructions and Ideological Deconstructions**

Part I surveys and discusses the epistemological issues mentioned above about the overemphasis on methods of contextualization to the expenses of hermeneutic techniques of analysis of the artwork. In addition, it provides a detailed definition of the critical inquiry as I have conceived it and which I call alternatively "applied aesthetics," "art criticism," or "art hermeneutic."<sup>8</sup> I must warn, however, that for the reader well acquainted with the contemporary standards of art criticism, some of these discussions might amount to stating the obvious. Their organization into a composite block may also cause some surprise. Similar to the term "aesthetic," each of the following words in the book's title, "hybridity," "Mughal," and "painting," announces a series of thematic arguments presented throughout Chapters 1 and 2. Unlike Part II, structured according to the traditional art historical mode of a fluid narrative chronologically ordered, Part I presents an aggregation of autonomous texts

that could parallel in literature the construction of *The Golden Notebook* by Doris Lessing (1962).<sup>9</sup> Each of the texts follows an internal flow of thought and discursive logic of its own, seemingly detached from the other essays and sometimes from the book's subject matter itself. Yet they are ultimately correlated with one another and with the texts of Part II by means of links of meaning one uncovers gradually as the text progresses.

While Chapter 1 delves into issues of epistemological attitude, approach, method, and definition, Chapter 2 focuses more on the historiography of Mughal and Persianate painting, though this subject is touched upon in both chapters. Throughout, four main issues dealing with the protocol of art history scholarship concerning this material are considered.

The first issue is the long domination of traditional methods of art historical practice, despite recent salutary changes and a growing number of scholars who genuinely practice an updated interdisciplinary method. This domination has created a conservative intellectual climate that resists more philosophical and aesthetic approaches, preventing their normalization and slowing their development.

The second issue concerns the dire consequences for criticism of the disregard for art theory and the lack of critical attention to aesthetic concepts, categories, and processes. Significant mistakes, misconceptions, and misinterpretations that would be unacceptable in other areas of art history weigh down studies of Islamic art and sometimes spoil the most valuable findings, although by virtue of this climate of conservatism they are rarely pointed out. I will thus show how defining features of Islamic artistic creation and especially painting, such as abstraction and geometric designs, suffer the most from this epistemic neglect and avoidance of theory. To sense the severity of the problem, one may come across quite ill-informed ideas such as "figurative representation is based more on sense perception than geometric abstraction" or "abstract designs opposed to the plastic arts."<sup>10</sup> The review of the latest historiographical account on Islamic art studies in Chapter 1 and the assessment of the scholarly literature on Mughal painting in Chapter 2 will shed a crude but necessary light on this state of affairs.

Pointing out deficiencies in understanding other important art forms such as stylized forms or the portrait genre offers the opportunity to set up theoretical guidelines that could better serve future aesthetic-critical studies of Islamic and other non-Western arts, and possibly artistic works beyond these areas as well.<sup>11</sup> Fully interdisciplinary, this book provides critical resources including, notably, the relatively new method of phenomenology in the study of art, concisely explicated in a theoretical exposé comprising quotations by phenomenologists such as Edmund Husserl. This method serves the analyses of Persian, Sultanate, and Mughal painting in Parts I and II. However, to better profit from the benefits of phenomenology in probing Islamic art, I will first address objections about its validity and usefulness for this material.

The third issue dealt with in Part I regards the effect of ethnocentric sensibilities in the study of Mughal painting. Diverse ideologies divide this scholarship into “pro” and “anti” camps; these will be detailed and examined in case studies. Eurocentrism, acute in the pan-Jesuit analysis of the material and in the presentation of the Mughal patron as a political tyrant depriving his artists of freedom of expression, is central to this deconstruction of subjective projections, which are made even by the most authoritative experts. Apologetic depictions of Jesuit missiological deeds in the early Modern world receive special attention in Chapter 2, as they constitute a key reference in Mughal art studies. Other forms of ethnocentrism less often discussed, such as Asiaticism, are also critiqued.

The fourth and particularly delicate issue probed in Part I concerns the use of period texts for interpreting Persianate paintings. Significant pitfalls, confusion, and blockages stem from the devotion to primary sources despite their elusiveness regarding the objective facts of the pictorial practice. In Chapter 1, two sections reevaluate the hermeneutic dimension of the Persian and Mughal texts referring to art. With these analyses as a backdrop, I review the citations and references in the historiography in order to unravel significant redundancies and poor critique. My criticism, however, by no means signifies any form of disregard for the invaluable original textual resources, which are explored throughout the book. For the purpose of showing the problematic reading of the primary sources in Islamic painting studies, I quote as a positive model Jacques Derrida’s writings, which critics ponder for understanding Modern and contemporary art.

Also in Chapter 1, an examination of the study of Persianate portraiture highlights the negative effects of overemphasizing texts and contexts while neglecting the artwork and its aesthetic conceptualization. By presenting key concepts used in Persianate human representation, this examination will also prepare the reader for the interpretations of the art of the Mughal portrait proposed in Part II.

Equally excessive, redundant, and derived from the same dedication to context, the experts’ focus on the commissioners’ political agenda to explain any aspect of Mughal art is similarly questioned. One reason this weakness in the dominant historiography cannot be put aside is that it has led some scholars to hold unacceptable “Orientalistic” views, in the sense Edward Said used this word.<sup>12</sup> The quasi-cartoonish figure of an almighty royal patron controlling the arts for the sole sake of his political ambition is not the least of these undesirable slips meticulously deconstructed.

#### *ABOUT THE TROPE OF HYBRIDITY*

Lastly, Part I endeavors to define the analytical parameters necessary to the examination of the trope of hybridity in the epistemological context of

visual aesthetics. Given the history of this sensitive trope, I felt compelled to survey in a concise manner the range of semantic-semiotic significations of which it has been the recipient historically, from purely linguistic definitions in association with other terminology such as syncretism, symbiosis, or eclecticism, to the heritage of postcolonial criticism. This survey yields to the exploration of the philosophy of difference as conceptual framework to the specific study of aesthetic hybridity in Mughal painting. The justifications of my own definition of hybridity in accordance to this book's views and arguments appear at the end of Chapter 2 to secure the logical transition between Parts I and II.

In present-day academic life, talking about hybridity seems commonplace, and yet it requires a great deal of preparatory work. Hybridness, transculturalism, and other phenomena of convergence in the past or today constitute important contemporary preoccupations, so much so that in the multitude of ideas and views on the subject delivered at a pace almost impossible to keep up with, it is no easy task to conceptually frame such a project. In addition, this book concerns South Asia, thus I am expected to reflect upon the legacies of postcolonial criticism and its newer currents of thought before choosing my hermeneutical parameters.<sup>13</sup> In facing this abundance of data and expectations, I decided to be selective.

First, I found it necessary to restrict the discussion of the approach to the concept of hybridity in historical-cultural studies. Finbarr B. Flood already masterfully laid the groundwork here in his relatively recent book on pre-Modern material culture in the subcontinent, *Object of Translation*; thus my topic's location in precolonial, early Modern times as well as the nature of the material observed, pictorial aesthetics, led me to privilege instead reflection on the philosophical dimensions of the concept.<sup>14</sup> If postcolonial criticism relevantly serves the goal to denounce ideological trends in the scholarship on South Asian and non-Western material, it does not play a defining conceptual role in the hermeneutic of early Mughal painting whose context was not concerned with the colonial dynamic of oppression and dispossession. Nor do I deem suitable for this book's task the postcolonial redeeming narratives and theories leveling hybridity to sameness, since hybridism constitutes one of the highly ipseitic signs of this art, at a level of significance beyond the hybrid features of style characterizing Persianate pictorial production in general.

Second, in contrast and comparison with the many cultural-historical discourses that have carved out models of thinking about hybridity, this concept seldom has been theorized in the specialized domain of applied aesthetics and art criticism. Aesthetic studies rely on the rich critical material formed by these historical-cultural models and the pure philosophy of difference and alterity of thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Emmanuel Levinas, or Jacques Derrida. As mentioned before, I too include elements of this philosophy in my references, but I also found that something

was missing for this book's project—namely, a properly defined lexicon adapted to the aesthetic analysis of the artworks themselves. The last portion of Chapter 2 provides this lexicon, reflecting the diversity of hybrid forms and hybridizing schemes and philosophies in precolonial Indo-Islamic artistic creation. The generic notion of aesthetic hybridism appears thus broken down into variegated sub-tropes and cognate terms suitable for describing this diversity, including “the non-hybrid” as a distinctive quality. Again, due to the sensitivity of such a notion, the reader is provided with supporting argumentation.

This lexicon is instrumental to the explanatory logic of the essays in Part II, which focus on the reconstitution of the genesis of Mughal painting and the “becoming” of its aesthetic hybridity up to the reign of Shah Jahan, *son “devenir”* to borrow Gilles Deleuze's French expression, in English, “becoming.”<sup>15</sup>

## Part II: The Hermeneutic of Mughal Pictorial Hybridity

Studies have well contextualized Mughal pictorial hybridity and evidenced the interaction of pluralistic picturing traditions in the artifacts' iconography.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, these aspects of hybridism are not examined here, only evoked to support an argument or revoked if deemed inaccurate. It is the unexplored part of this art that receives attention. This comprises the variegated creative principles and forces that engendered Mughal images' hybrid idiom and their profound meaning as aesthetic constructs beyond their apparent literal content. The analyses of these elements will lead to not only proposed new interpretations of the art itself but also a rereading of certain facets of its history.

By no means do the findings presented in Part II intend to answer all questions or solve all problems raised by Mughal hybrid painting. Rather, Part II's three chapters constitute a set of propositions on which future investigations can rely and build to renew research on this fascinating topic. As no critical-aesthetic case study on hybridism in this art has been conducted before, my work had to limit itself to the basic, founding factors; that is, the great philosophies, synergies, and conceptual underpinnings that gave rise to the Mughal hybrid pictoriality. This meant setting aside the variety of detail in the pictorial production, regional approaches and outcomes, individualized visions and practices of artists, and other particulars, for future interdisciplinary research. Similarly, the inquiry's time frame is restricted to the first manifestations and the developmental trajectory of Mughal pictorial hybridization up to its first marked dissolution into a non-hybridizing artistic practice. Consequently, starting from the empire's creation in 1526, the period observed herein ends with Shah Jahan's reign (1628–58) in which such a

dissolving process occurred. Painting and instances of hybridism beyond this early period of Mughal history do not fit within this book's scope. Thus, the elusive beginnings and, importantly, the roots of aesthetic hybridity in Mughal painting have absorbed a great part of my inquisitive efforts, with particular attention to Indo-Islamic pre-Mughal and Akbari art.<sup>17</sup>

#### *ELUSIVE BEGINNINGS*

In the history of Mughal painting, nothing is more challenging than trying to shed light on the enigma of its genesis. A cluster of problems including the scarcity of archaeological evidence before 1556, the political complications that agitated the establishment of the Mughal Empire before Akbar's consolidation, and even the vagueness shrouding the definition of Mughal pictorial ipseity itself, contribute to obscuring the unfolding of the early history and aesthetic logic of Mughal painting.

In Chapter 3, I offer a fresh chronicling and reading of the artistic events until the Akbari era, and more specifically a different interpretation of the Kabuli (from Kabul) artifacts commissioned by Humayun during his decade-long sojourn in the area before re-conquering Hindustan in 1554–55. The revisiting of these early episodes of the history of Mughal painting allowed me to proceed, before anything else, with a reevaluation of the South Asian legacy in the genesis of Mughal pictorial language. It was thus crucial to pay close attention to the underappreciated and aesthetically poorly understood Sultanate book art.

#### *LOOKING AT SULTANATE BOOK ART*

The detailed critical exploration of Sultanate book art will show it in a much more favorable light in view of the decisive innovations it brought to the tradition of Indian painting. It will unravel a much tighter correlation than usually thought between this local heritage and early Mughal painting, notably with the transmission of an elaborate philosophy of hybridity and a body-centered visual regime. In fact, the main argument of this sequence of sections on pre-Mughal Sultanate material posits it as the very conceptual foundation of the metaphysics of Mughal painting centered on the theme of the body, or what I call "the figure of the body," and inscribed in the world's concreteness. Thereby it unsettles the common view that univocally credits to the impact of European art on Mughal pictoriality the palpability of the figures, the physiognomic portrait, and the concept of plastic realism, generally considered the most important conquests of Mughal aesthetics and the ipseitic signs that singularize it in the pluralistic spectrum of Persianate paintings.<sup>18</sup>

The last part of Chapter 3 initiates the extensive investigation of the Akbari hybridism that continues through the remainder of Part II. This investigation begins by explaining the complex process of renewal of the Sultanate pictoriality in Akbari pictorial aesthetics: the circumstances of unprecedented resources inaugurated a fresh movement of artistic hybridization following the suspected but archaeologically unverifiable pre-exile encounter between the exogenous late Timurid and indigenous Indian pictorial traditions. In Akbar's superlative *kitabkhana*, the latest Persianate pictorial developments imported to India after Humayun's repatriation in 1556, supplemented with the new European artistic flow, had brought about decisive creative impulses, sophisticated techniques, and iconographic repertoires never seen before. However, within the intricacies of this "hyper-hybridism" under Akbar's patronage, the most determining force was evidently the Indo-Persian pictorial encounter upon which the Mughal painting's aesthetic ontology was constructed. Two major questions posed by this encounter, the tension between the Indian and Persian imagistic conceptions and the Mughal approach to pictoriality by the rationalization and detextualization of the image, close Chapter 3.

#### *PERSIAN PARAGONS AND HYPER-DIALECTICAL AKBARI CONSTRUCTIONS*

Chapter 4 channels and deepens these ideas, tackling other interrogations related to the Mughal Indo-Persian syncretism, which is characterized by an aesthetic of the hyper-dialectic.<sup>19</sup> But in pursuing this project, an important problem arose—namely, the absence of proper critical studies on the Persian pictorial aesthetic, indispensable for this inquiry. Chapter 4 addresses this vacuum through a series of exposés focused on the question of the nature of what I define and call "the Persian picture or image." The latter constitutes a generic aesthetic entity that, in terms of ontological constitution, was completed by the Timurid period (1370–1507). As demonstrated in this sub-study, the Persian image bears the traits of a pictoriality of scriptural ontology with a chirographic plasticity phenomenologically operating like a verbal system.

Thanks to these findings, it will be possible to grasp the Mughal apprehension of the Persian pictoriality based on a double strategy of retention and deconstruction for the purpose of constructing a new imagistic language characteristically anthropocentric and of a mimetic order. Thus, while retaining the lyricism of the forms and certain principles of designs of the Persian paragons, at the same time the Mughal artists worked at transforming the pictorial field into a metaphysical mirror of Nature centered on the human figure. The variegated aesthetic methods and plastic manipulations that the Mughals deployed to achieve this goal during the period of Akbar's rule

are sorted out one by one in this chapter, as well as their effects of hyper-dialectical tension in the Akbari pictorial visuality.

*ABOUT THE ROLE OF EUROPEAN ART*

European art has played a significant role in this Akbari enterprise of imitative restructuring of the image. Chapter 5 delves into this question, but Chapter 4 begins to touch upon it in the framework of the analysis of a specific motif instrumental to the Mughal reshaping of the pictorial field: the skies. This analysis presents my view on the contribution of European forms to Mughal pictorial elaboration, which is further argued in the book's last portion.

This view is that Europe had a considerable but only supplemental part in this elaboration. It did not have a conceptualizing impact on the Mughal pictorial practice, anchored in Indian and Persianate traditions. By "supplemental," I mean that the Western artistic influx offered a valuable stock of iconographic patterns and pictorial techniques that stimulated and helped the Mughals carry out their creative project but did not participate in its conceptual foundation. In a process of fortuitous convergence, European art and the aesthetic metaphysics it conveyed happened to perfectly suit the Mughals' aesthetic vision of images in intimacy with the living world and in which they could contemplate the reality of their lives and peoples, and communicate their thoughts about them.

*THE CENTERPIECE OF MUGHAL PAINTING: THE HUMAN FIGURE*

Dealing with the dimensionally philosophical topic of the Mughal's realistic portrayal of the human figure, Chapter 5 offers multiple elements to further support this understanding. In the historiography, the rise of Mughal portraiture is credited to the "influence" of Renaissance prints and paintings. But this reductive interpretation not only ignores or minimizes the Indian roots of Mughal human representation but also overlooks the decisive impact of the Safavid picturing techniques that include physiognomic rendition, although in a selective and controlled manner. In reconsidering more closely the three major artistic forces at work in Akbari painting—the Sultanate, Persianate, and European artistic forces—I argue that not just one of them but rather a joint synergy between them produced the Mughal art of naturalism and its masterpiece, the Mughal physiognomic portrait.

*MULTIFACETED APPEARANCE OF THE MUGHAL EMPEROR*

Subsequently, Chapter 5 explores the evolution of the imperial image itself in the three successive phases of Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan's reigns that followed the emergence of a Humayuni signaletic (codified, not physiognomic) portrait, invented to represent perceptually the Mughal family

in Kabul. These different sequences correspond to distinctive Mughal uses and manifestations of the concept of likeness, beginning with the intention to materialize the imperial presence in the picture by means of semiotic codes, evolving into the realistic picturing of the imperial body first in the form of the plainly human Akbari portrait, followed by the hyper-semantization of the imperial image in Jahangir's reign, and finally crowned by a fully operational iconification of it under Shah Jahan's patronage.

This fascinating exploration focuses on the Jahangiri pictorial production and the important creations with which it has enriched Indian painting. Unsatisfactorily described in the research, the great themes developed under Jahangir's patronage are thus given particular attention. Among them two topics stand out: the phenomenon of the canonization of the profile view in Mughal portraiture and the association of the Christian icons of Jesus, Mary, and the angels with the Mughal emperor's portrait and presence.

About the profile feature, I will show that, besides its adequateness in relation to the Hindu-inspired social protocol regulating the Mughal emperor's mode of appearing in public, it is a thoughtful appreciation of the profiled likeness's semiotic, phenomenological, and aesthetic workings that over time made this format the most eloquent Mughal formula of portraiture.

As to the second important feature of the Christian iconography, explicating its purpose and meaning in the Mughal context required discussion of what I have designated the "humanist convergence." Different levels of connection and disconnection between the Mughal Islamic system of thought and Renaissance humanism are brought to light to better understand the discrepancy between the tenor of the interfaith dialogues held at the *ibadatkhana*, stressing the pattern of divergence, and the consequences of the general phenomenon of the Christian-Mughal encounter in the aesthetic domain enhancing the contrary pattern of convergence. Based on the results of this hermeneutic work, at the end of the book I provide some explanations regarding what I ultimately consider in these images to be a religious visual discourse about monotheism conveying the Mughal reiteration of the Muslim claim about the true religion, Islam.

Finally, the ascertainment of the mutation of aesthetic hybridity into non-hybridism in Shahjahani painting will close this book's inquiry.

## Notes

- 1 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), 41.
- 2 The word "understanding" in art history means both gazing at and reading the artwork, as in *Understanding Art Objects, Thinking through the Eye*, ed. Tony Godfrey (London: Lund Humphries, 2009).

- 3 A clarification about the locution “Islamic arts” and other similar expressions is necessary as they constitute an unsatisfactory terminology that does not faithfully reflect a much more complex reality. Not all the cultural products of the Muslim world necessarily have a link with Islam as a religion, and not all the artists and art consumers and commissioners were Muslims themselves. Yet these terms are still used in academic programs, events, course titles, and publications. The term “Islamicate” appears alternatively used but I do not think it makes much difference or solves the problem, so I take the liberty to use both equally in this book. As Gülru Necipoğlu acknowledged, “The ambiguous appellation ‘Islamic Art’ is indeed misleading, even though no satisfactory alternative has emerged.” In Necipoğlu, “The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches,” *Journal of Art Historiography: Islamic Art Historiography* 6 (June 2012): 11. Originally published in *Islamic Art and the Museum*, ed. Benoît Junod et al. (London: Saqi, 2012). See also in this publication, Avinoam Shalem, “Prologue.”
- 4 The term “Persianate” generically refers to the culture of different regions and polities in the Muslim world that have been nurtured by Persian culture, among them the Mughal Empire. This notion of Persian culture itself applies to the cultural products of historic Iran. Importantly, the two terms “Persianate” and “Persian” are not used to mean the same thing in this book. When the term “Persian” appears it only refers to the Iranian world, whereas “Persianate” refers inclusively and specifically to all the areas and peoples affiliated with this world by cultural linkages. In other respects, the geopolitical notion of “Muslim world” itself raises questions dealt with by Masachi Haneda, “Modern Europe and the Creation of the ‘Islamic World,’” *International Journal of Asian Studies* 4, 2 (2007): 201–19. But again I use the expression “Muslim or Islamic world” for convenience.
- 5 This brings to mind the philosophical dimension of the painting explored by Michel Foucault in the beginning of *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (Les Mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines)* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1970).
- 6 See the first critique ever openly published about this state of affairs by Gregory Minissale, introduction, *Images of Thought, Visuality in Islamic India, 1550–1750* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006). I must say that despite my enthusiastic response to this book’s innovative approach, I also distance myself from it in many respects, as is thoroughly discussed in Chapter 2.
- 7 Quoted above.
- 8 Through these designations I refer to the ever-evolving multidisciplinary array of aesthetic-critical methods used to comment on the art. I am aware though that they remain loosely defined. But precisely owing to this lack of definition these designations are also flexible. They may reach out to new techniques of investigation crossing the borders with scientific disciplines such as “neuroarthistory.” See this first selection of publications: *Visuality/Materiality, Identity, Critique and Ethics*, ed. Gillian Rose and Divya Tolia-Kelly (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2012); Barry Sandywell, *Dictionary of Visual Discourse: A Dialectical Lexicon of Terms* (Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011); Herbert D. James, “Visual Culture/Visual Studies,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago; London:

- University of Chicago Press, 2003), 452–64; Marquand Smith, “Visual Culture Studies: Questions of History, Theory and Practice,” in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 455–67.
- 9 Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (London: HarperCollins, 2002).
  - 10 See in Chapter 2 of this book, “Category Mistakes, Conceptual Inaccuracies, and Problematic Terminology.”
  - 11 At the 2014 annual meeting of the Association of Art Historians in the United Kingdom, I had the opportunity to participate in a pluridisciplinary panel dedicated to Indian cultures and religions. The discussions disclosed one more time the obsolescence of the methodology and the necessity to engage in theoretical reflection in Buddhist and Sikh art studies.
  - 12 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).
  - 13 A terminological clarification is needed here. First, this book does not take into account the Partition. Second, “India” and “South Asia,” as far as this book is concerned, correspond to two different geographical-cultural entities. “India” is to be understood as the equivalent of the Indian subcontinent, excluding eastern Afghanistan. The latter region is conjoined but culturally distinct from our study’s perspective, even though it was part of the Mughal Empire for a while in the early Modern period. “South Asia” does include it. It designates the cluster of present-day regions of India, Pakistan, eastern Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. The distinctions of cultures and Islamic history between eastern Afghanistan and its neighboring areas in the subcontinent in the medieval and early Modern period motivate this differentiation. By extension, everything related to India thus defined is generically designated “Indian,” while the word “Indic” describes more specifically the rich compound of non-Islamic non-monotheistic cultures in South Asia, again for the strict purpose of distinction, not separation.
  - 14 Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval “Hindu-Muslim” Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
  - 15 The term “becoming” refers to Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy of difference. See *The Deleuze Dictionary*, ed. Adrian Parr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 21–22, and the interesting use of this concept throughout her book by Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinity: An Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010). See also chapter 10, Gilles Deleuze, *Mille plateaux* (Paris: Minuit, 1980), *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), and “Gilles Deleuze,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, September 24, 2012, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/deleuze/>, accessed May 1, 2014.
  - 16 In the 1980s reputed scholars such as Ashok Kumar Das, Stuart Cary Welch, Milo C. Beach, Nora M. Titley, and others explored the confluences of Islamic, Christian, Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist cultures and artistic traditions in Mughal art using traditional methods of art history. Any contemporary specialist of this art is indebted to their seminal works.
  - 17 The term “Akbari” signifies the quality of belonging to the period of rule and culture of Emperor Akbar (1556–1605), and similarly so for the other imperial

adjectives mentioned in this book: “Humayuni” for Emperor Humayun (1530–56, with an exile parenthesis 1540–54), “Jahangiri” for Emperor Jahangir (1605–27) and “Shahjahani” for Emperor Shah Jahan (1628–58).

- 18 Regarding the concept of pictoriality, see Whitney Davis, “Visuality and Pictoriality,” *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics, Polemical Objects* 46 (Autumn 2004): 9–31.
- 19 The concept of “hyper-dialectics” was invented by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. All the necessary details about it are provided in Chapter 4.

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**PART I**  
**Studying Mughal Painting:**  
**Critical Issues and State of Affairs**

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## Epistemological Preliminaries

Too often do reviewers remind us of the mob of Astrologers, Chaldeans, and Soothsayers gathered before the "writing on the wall" [Daniel, 5:7], and unable to read the characters or make known the interpretation.

Currer Bell (aka Charlotte Brontë)

The academic literature on Mughal painting is undeniably rich.<sup>1</sup> The dissemination of the collections throughout the world has facilitated their study by scholars, curators, and connoisseurs from Asia, Europe, and America, and all have significantly contributed to our historical knowledge of this fascinating material. However, the use of the expression "historical knowledge" instead of just "knowledge" is intentional. It is meant to underscore an asymmetry that characterizes the findings on not only Mughal painting but also, more broadly, Islamic pictorial art. This asymmetry is seen in the epistemological difference between evidencing and understanding, between historical-cultural information, descriptive accounts, and understanding the nature of the art itself.<sup>2</sup> While the historiography on painting from the Islamic world provides plenty of information about its history, archaeology, iconographic, and stylistic components, it seldom deals with the aesthetic hermeneutic of the images.<sup>3</sup> The creative principles of the pictorial practice, the working of the plastic forms, their semantic properties and ontology, their "becoming" and "lives" in the Deleuzian sense, have not been adequately probed.<sup>4</sup> In short, painting as a cultural signifier in the Islamic world has received much attention with remarkable results, but as art it remains less well understood. This state of affairs compels one to ponder several epistemological problems, setting aside the need to redefine and clarify visual concepts and tropes too loosely or inaccurately used in studies on Islamic art.

### The Question of Art History versus Art Criticism

Although far from being a new object of debate, the question of art history versus art criticism has decisive significance here because of this book's distinctive approach in relation to the sheer number of publications on Persianate painting in general. My view of this question, however, posits it in terms of "traditional art history" versus "new interdisciplinary art history," which I associate with art criticism or aesthetics applied to the probing of artworks produced in Islam. We may add to this description that one approach focuses on art *productivity* while the other focuses on the art *products* themselves. Nonetheless, following this epistemic divide the great majority of studies belong to the category of art history, while our study falls within that of art criticism and aesthetics.

The designation "art criticism," however, requires further clarification. An important point to make is that in this book, and in my research in general, it does not involve evaluating the quality of the objects, as is the case for the analysis of contemporary art. On the other hand, art criticism of Persianate painting involves the examination of a work as an aesthetic entity. But what exactly is an "aesthetic entity"?<sup>5</sup>

Artworks are aesthetic entities insofar as their ontological definition rests upon their visual forms' perceptual properties deliberately produced or created to generate sensory cognitions through which the beholder engages in psychic and intellectual experience. Although the generic quality of being "aesthetic" is often casually conflated with the specificity of being "beautiful," the artwork's aesthetic qualities do not necessarily include beauty nor does the experience of this artwork necessarily trigger the feeling or sensation of the beautiful. In art history writing, it is up to the argument's context and wording to indicate whether the adjective "aesthetic" means beautiful or refers to the object's capital of beauty. This book does not authorize the casual amalgam of meaning between "aesthetic" and "beautiful." Finally, there is the ontological difference between visual and nonvisual aesthetics that sometimes echo each other, as we will have the opportunity to observe. The art theorist Jean Fisher remarked, "visual art remains a materially based process, functioning on the level of affect, not purely semiotics—i.e. a synaesthetic relation is established between work and viewer which is *in excess of visibility*."<sup>6</sup>

The knowledge gathered from all the enquiries that target processes and facts surrounding but not centered on this aesthetic foundation of the artwork constitute an *episteme* that I designate with the all-embracing expression "the archaeology of art." But straightaway these terms "*episteme*" and "archaeology" require a preliminary explanation.

The meaning of these terms as I use them does not allude to Michel Foucault's approach to the same notions in his history of thought, although by nature such an argument does necessarily evoke his founding contribution

to epistemology. Here "*episteme*" refers to the regular, generic Greek technical locution that signifies a category of knowledge or science commonly used in any discussion of epistemology. It does not convey the specific intimations and conceptualizations the French thinker has put into it. Similarly, I do not intend to bring Foucault's interpretation of the concept of archaeology into my definition of it, as it does not relate to his meta-humanistic ideas operating beneath the level of individual consciousness, in the collective unconscious. In fact, there are many "archaeologies" depending on the critical framework in which they operate, including within Foucault's multifaceted epistemology itself where one may deal with the overarching "archaeology of knowledge," "the archaeology of human sciences" or the more specific "archaeology of the medical gaze."<sup>7</sup> My propos is very pragmatic and limits itself to the technicalities of art history practice, well short of the philosophical scope of Foucault's decoding of patterns of primordial thinking beyond individual will. We may say that the connection between Foucault's discourse on epistemology and archaeology and my own contouring of the tropes is rather superficial.

Thus, by the locution "archaeology of art," I mean to include the original meaning that traditional art history gave to it in surveys of ancient arts as well as its reference to site investigation fieldwork. But I also refine and expand this definition to better distinguish these established practices from the newest interdisciplinary ones. In this book, "the archaeology of art" constitutes a multidisciplinary category that integrates historical and cultural contextualization of the material under observation, the anthropology and sociology of art, museology, codicology and conservation studies. The "archaeology of art" is thus to be understood as historical-sociological knowledge *about* art as distinct from aesthetic-critical knowledge *of* art.

By inference, the findings brought about by the aesthetic-critical enquiry compose another distinct *episteme* that specifically concerns questions of plastic conceptualization, image construction, visual cognitivity, processes of semiotization and semantization of the forms, and aesthetic ontology and phenomenology.<sup>8</sup> About the phenomenological method in particular, Edmund Husserl explains that it interrogates "the constitution of objects of all sorts within cognition," and deals with issues of "cognitions as appearances, presentations, acts of consciousness in which this or that object is presented, is an object of consciousness, passively or actively," or "the constitution of the object of experience."<sup>9</sup> In sum, the critical *episteme* consists of the knowledge about what I concisely call "the aesthetic physics and metaphysics of the artwork." A short theoretical exposé is again necessary.

Any art form, and a fortiori any image or painting, is a metaphysical mirror. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote, "Any theory of painting is a metaphysics."<sup>10</sup> This statement can be further extended with the corollary claim that any painting or image constitutes *a represented metaphysics*, that is, a physical

perceptual representation of metaphysics in the aesthetic domain. Otherwise termed, a metaphysics represented in art and aesthetics results from the process of expressing, representing, and communicating by perceptual means or material forms a particular mode of world-apprehension. In painting, this metaphysics of aesthetic order is represented in the image's aesthetic physics comprising the constitutive elements of the imagistic construct. The physics of the painted representation is to be distinguished from the physics of its medium, book, album, folio, canvas, fabric, and so on. By way of consequence, what we usually consider as the aesthetic ontology of painting or art corresponds to the nature of this compound of the object's aesthetic physics and metaphysics. But that is not all.

Owing to the ontological duality in art of form and content or expression and subject matter or aesthetic means and ends, the object's metaphysics is, in principle, binary. It has two distinct levels corresponding to the metaphysics of the *representer*, image or painting, and the metaphysics of the *representation* understood as the narrative or iconographic discourse this image or painting conveys. In other words, this second metaphysical level resides in the painting's semantics and discourse, and corresponds to the conception of the world its iconography delivers, while the primary metaphysical level resides in the painting's plastic structure and corresponds to the conception of the world its forms and visual concepts reflect or design. That in some instances the two metaphysical levels of the artwork appear conflated into a unique and single construct is a matter of strategy and manipulation, as observed for example in some branches of Abstract and Minimalist art characterized by the intentional elimination of any content outside or separate from the form which then *is* the content itself.<sup>11</sup> This, however, by no means concerns Persianate painting for which this conceptual divide remains fully operative and relevant.

Finally, one crucial point must be retained from this theoretical explanation. Based on this binary scheme of the art's plasticity and discourse, our designation "metaphysics of the image, picture, or painting" precisely designates the mode of world-apprehension reflected in the forms or in the pictorial-aesthetic language, not the mode of world apprehension communicated through the represented narrative, the representation's content or iconographic semantics.

### How to Practice Art Criticism? A Matter of Choice

The spectrum of disciplines the designation "art criticism" covers is, so to speak, unlimited and unfixed. Any analytical technique that allows the elucidation of problems related to art's becoming and being, and of what the artworks says and how it says it, acquires immediate legitimacy. In this sense I equate art criticism with the concept of art hermeneutic and allow

myself to talk about “visual exegesis.” Objections have been made about the adequacy of the tools and lexicon of textual analysis and literary criticism for the study of material objects based on the ontological difference between texts and things.<sup>12</sup> My stance on this issue consists in putting aside the controversy and apprehending the concept of hermeneutic as an interpretive activity that epistemologically posits both visual and written material as a broad field of thought and expression.<sup>13</sup> Seen from this perspective, hermeneutic better emphasizes the centrality of the artifact as an object of cognitivity in art historical research. However, to avoid any possible confusion, and contrary to what opponents of art criticism and aesthetics applied to Islamic art usually say to justify their position, contextualization, as distinct from the hermeneutic practice of reading the object, constitutes an essential parameter of study. The established methods of contextualization partake of the pluridisciplinary panoply of the critic of Islamic art who is no different than, say, the French paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin, who declared that nothing is intelligible outside of history.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, art criticism shares with archaeology of art some basic analytical methods, such as formal and iconographic analysis and socio-historical investigation. However, art criticism departs from archaeology of art as the former freely crosses or removes the boundaries between disciplines, eras, regions, and other traditional categories petrifying the artwork in its status of historical evidence and period cultural signifier, thus leaving in the dark entire dimensions of the artworks’ structures and meaning. Understanding the circumstances of creation does serve the hermeneutic-critical project but is neither its only or even main goal. This goal also basically consists of highlighting the internal complexities of art conceptualized more as a subject with a life of its own rather than an object fixed and entirely controlled by the external, contingent laws of history.

#### *AN OLD NEW MANNER OF INVESTIGATING ARTWORKS*

Such an epistemic view necessitates a flexible and open conceptual framework and methodology. Therefore, the critic’s analytical apparatus, always potentially expandable and changeable, integrates interpretive strategies very often unfamiliar to the historians of Islamic art, a fortiori to those who refuse to intersect history and period texts with cross-cultural philosophical and theoretical material. Let us insist, however, that this apparatus by no means excludes valid routines of traditional art history. It just filters out some obsolete methods, highly contingency-dependent modes of appreciation and other excessively subjective views, notably those informed by any form of ethnocentrism. In addition to this reshaped legacy, transnational and trans-period tools of art theory, worldly artists’ writings and manifests, literature and, of course, the numerous specialized philosophies and humanities

dealing with artistic creation are all brought together. In this sense the research philosophy on the arts in Islam follows that of other art analysts like Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung, who in the 1980s had posited:

In the area of contemporary art and art history, learning to think from such perspectives [continental philosophy, post-structuralism, feminism, psychoanalysis, literary studies, new historicism, and postcolonialism among others] felt urgent, necessary, and exiting. In our encounters with culture, politics, and art, we found ourselves dividing our thinking into before and after our introduction to the theoretical writings that seemed to illuminate them in ways that seemed both timely and essential.<sup>15</sup>

Although there was never a consensus or closure on debates about the appropriateness of a particular school of thought or trend of critical theory, since the early 1980s this heterogeneous material “has gone through a process of normalization. The application of theoretical ideas proliferated exponentially in the general lexicon of most art institutions.”<sup>16</sup> Today, no doctrinal dominance forces the choice, while discussions in the academic and artistic arenas are more lively than ever. Many contemporary art critics and analysts have simply discarded any legacy. They freely navigate through the various streams of contemporary art discourse, thus being able to design a pluridisciplinary framework of their own.<sup>17</sup> Needless to say I count myself among these practitioners. And while I touch upon quite diverse approaches, as this book will show, I emphasize phenomenology, a method only recently applied within the framework of art history.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, scholarship on Islamic art has remained largely behind movements of theoretical, aesthetic, and critical thought during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Some very rare works in the mid-1990s successfully implemented the more established practice of semiotics with the aid of period philosophy, although these works did not trigger more multidisciplinary critical studies until the salutary though often unsteady recent changes.<sup>19</sup> Those valuable early contributions have been followed at the turn of the twenty-first century by my own work that endeavors to introduce into the historical discourse on Islamic art other methods of critical theory alongside semiotics and the use of Islamic philosophical resources.<sup>20</sup> These endeavors, however, have remained an isolated act for more than a decade, a Don Quixote-esque pursuit against the odds.

Fortunately, the last years have seen the appearance of more hermeneutically oriented publications relying on a more solid theoretical knowledge, but mainly in the study of Islamic material culture and the growing field of the arts of the Modern period directly concerned by cultural theories and postcolonial and postmodern thought.<sup>21</sup> Regarding early Modern painting in Islam, scarce attempts to interrogate the artifacts’ aesthetic have been made, but they happen to be flawed improvisations with no adequate methodological support.<sup>22</sup>

Therefore these studies cannot be reasonably considered proper critical inquiries. On the other hand, this scholarship on painting in Islam continues to thrive in following the established traditions of codicology, iconographic deciphering and interpretation, stylistic identification and tracking, and other cognate disciplines. In sum, the studies on Islamic visual forms still remain overwhelmingly art historical-archaeological in the conventional way.

### **Heterodoxy of Aesthetics in Islamic Art Studies**

The reason for the state of affairs described above is twofold: the scholarly field's infra-logic of development stemming from objective needs and necessities, and the research philosophy of many of its practitioners entrenched in an exclusive system of routines and customs.

As in any other domain of art history acutely concerned with unanswered historical questions and still in the expectation of discovering and retrieving evidence, archaeology (in the broad sense just defined) is utterly relevant in the domain of Islamic art. In book art and painting, pressing issues of attribution, dates, classification, identification, and conservation necessitate continued attention. Even leaving aside unsolved questions of historical order such as the transmission of Timurid painting to India at the beginning of the Mughal dynasty's reign, there is an important need to reconstitute the original material forms and structure of artifacts altered, refurbished, and scattered throughout the ages, some of them composing extremely complex palimpsests.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, there still exist objects and monuments that have not been studied for reasons of inaccessibility, poor conditions of preservation, or just lack of awareness.

Yet, this historical-archaeological infra-logic of the discipline has had some worrying side effects. A true monopoly of archaeology of art has been instituted that has prevented normalization of a fully fledged interdisciplinarity. Although inexorably progressing, epistemological diversity still remains more often nominal and claimed than effectively implemented, while the aesthetic critique of Islamic art continues to be marginalized, explicitly or implicitly contested by some, or just ignored by others. Conservative reflexes and a reactionary vision of art criticism and its literature pervade and cripple this scholarship, as on the institutional scene this type of inquiry has been de facto virtually excluded from the powerful archaeological institutions' activities. This exclusion reflects a troubling oppositional logic of orthodoxy versus heterodoxy by negatively positing traditional art history and critical inquiry as two incompatible models of discourse, instead of positively conceiving them in complementarity, as ought to be.<sup>24</sup> For the old guard's "irreducibles" who still count among the most authoritative voices on the history of painting

in Islam, these two discourses are squarely two distinct fields of study with little linkage to one another.

This unsympathetic attitude has crystallized in the assimilation of art criticism to a category loosely labeled “postmodernism.” This concept and the adjective “postmodern” have been trivially employed as a depreciatory umbrella locution, a code word to designate the ultimate nonsense that some perceive in the application of critical theories and Western aesthetic philosophy to Islamic art, at best to declare it a methodological incongruity. At the same time and with great inconsistency, “postmodernism” also occasionally appears in publications to gloss and modernize in appearance discussions that too often remain old fashioned in substance and content. This scholarly pattern can be detected in the recent historiography of Islamic art, dealt with shortly, and through an arsenal of negative arguments used to dismiss or even ridicule any openly aesthetic-critical essay on this material, regardless of the specifics and quality of its content. To deconstruct the objections against this practice I borrow the rhetorical litany formula “I have read” that Jean-Francois Lyotard once employed in his writings.<sup>25</sup>

“I have read that ...”

“I have read” that the choice of critical resources drawing from Western aesthetics and phenomenology is a candid proposition, a postmodern act, in sum a wishful thinking unlikely to succeed.<sup>26</sup> About the Alhambra palaces, “I have read” that as a historical case marred by unsolved archaeological questions the monument cannot receive aesthetic-critical attention.<sup>27</sup> This serious objection calls for a counterargument.

Although many shadows obscure our understanding of the Alhambra compound’s building structure, functionality, and history, it is not a ruin. Apart from the fact that later North African intact constructions based on the Alhambra model allow one to get a rather good sense of its designs and aesthetics, a substantial part of it remains well enough preserved to sustain and legitimate the aesthetic-critical approach as long as historical problems are properly taken into account.<sup>28</sup> The same remark applies to any artwork of the past that raises archaeological questions including manuscripts, our topic of interest. While in the study of art from other ages, the awareness of being faced with an altered object and having an incomplete knowledge of it is a pre-requisite, the necessity of historical elucidation by no means delegitimizes critical inquiry, which should not be reserved solely for the modern and contemporary artistic production.

“I have read” that the aesthetic interpretations of Islamic artworks are unnecessarily difficult to read as they use an incomprehensible jargon. Complaints and derogatory comments about the specialized terminology and phraseology drawing extensively from philosophical and art theoretical modes of writing are recurrent.<sup>29</sup> James Elkins’s observation (made in the 1990s!) will do the job of counterarguing: “of the jargon that makes some texts

of the humanities opaque: when it is omitted the subject itself changes, and a readable version of Martin Heidegger or Jacques Lacan is different in kind from the original. Jargon, contrary to the usual opinion, cannot be stripped away in favor of good writing.<sup>30</sup> In due course it will be demonstrated how confusing and misleading casual or vernacular vocabulary and wording can be when it comes to describing complex aesthetic processes, phenomena, and concepts. Besides, philosophical reasoning and its technical language have turned out to be very useful in unsettling the problematic perception of art criticism as an essentializing, anachronistic, and a-historical method.<sup>31</sup>

"I have read," and this is the last objection to deconstruct, that a-historicism invalidates the aesthetic-critical analysis. This standard view considers this type of analysis too abstract and essentializing, in the negative sense of reductionist. It supposedly ignores the object's historical and cultural specificities and distracts the attention from the contextually determined meaning of the artwork. Straightaway, this narrow reasoning does not leave any chance for phenomenology, which, by definition, is a-historical. This is a rather complex matter that necessitates some theoretical clarification.

### **The Phenomenological Approach to Art**

Phenomenology is a-historical since it seeks the comprehension of essences based on what Edmund Husserl has described as "the possibility of the constitution of 'an objective nature' at the level of intersubjective experience."<sup>32</sup> Although the phenomenological approach has not been completely accepted in the community of art historians and critics, the charge of a-historicism appears at first untenable in the face of an artistic object's ontology.<sup>33</sup> On the one hand philosophers like Martin Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze, and Felix Guattari, and on the other hand, artists who have recorded their thought in writings, all have claimed and shown that art has life in the sense that it possesses an inner logic of being and becoming from the moment it is created.<sup>34</sup> By virtue of artistic forms' intrinsic creative mechanisms and generative capacity, art is partly self-operatory and partly self-signifying. As Paul Klee wrote in *Diary*, "[artistic] creation lives as a genesis under the visible surface of the artwork."<sup>35</sup> Consequently, an artwork is both dependent on and autonomous from context, while its capital of meaning is supplied by a complex factorial dynamic of interconnective productive forces from within and without, under the impulse of intentionality and beyond it.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, to obtain a reasonable level of knowledge of art, the historical-contextual methodology, proclaimed almighty by many art historians, de facto commands the collaboration of other much-needed tools as this very methodology loses efficacy when it comes to grasp this intimate and essential part of an artwork. Furthermore, the latter's internal structure may nest or

express cultural patterns manifest in its forms but undetectable or invisible in the cultural context. These facts alone—namely, these ontological specificities of art and the hermeneutic limitation of contextualization to illuminate it—justify a focused approach to an object as an autonomous entity once its objective constitution has been reasonably identified and defined. As the art's modalities of signifying are primarily perceptual and its phenomenality constitutes the very instrument of its communication with the viewer, artistic products are by essence and nature phenomenological. This tangible truth not only legitimates but also compels one to investigate an artwork using the phenomenological method. But then, what this method precisely demands is to temporarily remove from its epistemic perspective any empirical, historical, and psychological conditions to suit the phenomenological *positum* thus described by Edmund Husserl:

To every region and category of alleged objects [artworks] there corresponds phenomenologically not only a fundamental sort of sense, or of *posita*, but also a fundamental type of originally presentive consciousness of such senses, and belonging to it, a fundamental type of originary evidence which is essentially motivated by originary givenness of such a character.<sup>37</sup>

To reach out to this originary layer of the artwork that is given and exposed in its mode of appearing, the object must be observed under the particular light of its primal phenomenal state, similar to the object of physics whose validity resides in the intersubjective (transcendental) sphere. Husserl again explains this limpidly:

In physics as the mere natural study of the intersubjective-Objective thing existing “in itself,” the thing is Objectively determined as an empty something, determined through the intersubjectively constituted forms of space and time and through the “primary qualities” related to space and time. All secondary qualities, indeed precisely everything that can be given intuitively, *including all intuitive spatial and temporal forms* [history, factual events] which are quite unthinkable without secondary filling, all differences in orientation [culture], etc.—these do not belong there [in the phenomenological analysis].<sup>38</sup>

Consequently, the so decried a-historicism is actually the condition *sine qua non* of the aesthetic phenomenological inquiry, and as such it constitutes a feature of great hermeneutic dimension rendering senseless this objection aiming to undermine any research project of art history involving phenomenology. Ultimately, would not blaming aesthetic phenomenology for its a-historicism be paramount to blaming mathematics for not including psychologism in its pragmatics or a strawberry for not tasting like a green bean?

Yet, it must be underscored that the practitioner of aesthetic phenomenology is perfectly aware of the extreme specialization of phenomenological practice in the framework of art history; a practice motivated by strictly determined

hermeneutic objectives. The very phenomenological principle of the transcendental reduction, the Husserlian *epoche* whose presuppositions have just been expounded, is crystal-clear about its exact analytical purpose, scope, and outcome: it puts aside all the elements of factuality, historicity, causality, and (non-transcendental) subjectivity that bring about the existence of an artistic object and inform the psychological individual response to it for the sake of one particular goal: that is, focusing on the double phenomenon of its giving, its apparition, or its manifestation in the visual space—if we talk about visual art—and of the sensory perception of it as the primal path to consciousness prior to any projective process. In this pause or suspension from any instance of empiricity offered by the *epoche*, the object presents itself as an essence, a pure or quasi-pure given. It uncovers or discloses its aesthetic-perceptual being in total or quasi-total transparency, thereby allowing us scholars or art analysts to sort out the process of its constitution in the prelogic consciousness at this decisive moment of the sensory capturing. It thus prepares the observer to concentrate on the object's primal modalities of visual semantization.

In the light of this brief exposé, which the growing literature on phenomenology and the arts can further substantiate, the accusations of a-historicism and essentialization are nothing other than a distortion of what the unraveling of essences is about in the hermeneutic quest in general, and the phenomenological quest in particular. In the mind of the “anti-Islamic art critic,” unfamiliar with phenomenology and aesthetic philosophy, essentializing amounts to an unproductive and superficial process of schematization. Whether endorsed, disapproved, or challenged, the Husserlian transcendental reduction cannot by any means be considered reductionist in the sense of a sweeping view or simplification of complexities. By inference, the difficult enterprise of extracting the *substantifique moelle* (essence) from the artwork cannot reasonably be considered essentializing.<sup>39</sup> However, if these fundamental aspects of an artwork that phenomenology highlights are out of the analytical reach of conventional methods of art history, conversely, the phenomenological analysis equally presents its own elucidatory limitations. Therefore by no means does the phenomenologist pretend to provide a full account of the many diverse interrogations surrounding an artwork, as the traditional scholar tends to do. Like the semiotician or the cognitive psychologist, the aesthetic phenomenologist knows where she/he stands. Phenomenological findings may be either self-worthy within the confines of the approach or be given further hermeneutical dimensions when combined with other art historical and critical results. For example, the coupling of phenomenological and cultural-sociological analyses or psychoanalytical exploration may optimize the interpretation of an artwork within the full scope of its cognitivity and an understanding of its multilevel implications in aesthetic experience.<sup>40</sup>

*INTEREST IN THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD IN BYZANTINE ART STUDIES*

To put things in perspective, while phenomenological methodology indeed forms a marginal trend in the history of arts from the past, it must be noted that it has been applied and successfully received in the field of Byzantine studies. The implementation of this methodology in a 2011 essay by Bissera Pentcheva to which I contributed both writing and conceptual framing, proved to have greatly advanced the knowledge and understanding of Hagia Sophia.<sup>41</sup> In the introduction to Pentcheva's groundbreaking article, "Aural Architecture: Phenomenology and Multi-Sensory Aesthetics in Hagia Sophia," she frames her investigation with a reworded description borrowed from my 2003 essay, "The Comares Hall in the Alhambra and James Turrell's Space That Sees: A Comparison of Aesthetic Phenomenology," thus de facto bridging the two fields of study.<sup>42</sup> Presenting this concrete example of phenomenological application will give a better sense of the method's modalities and efficiency, as well as of the absolute necessity of strict conceptual accuracy in its practice. Here is an excerpt from my essay used by Pentcheva describing the optical effects of an open-air aperture in the ceiling of James Turrell's construction, analyzed in comparison with a domed room in the Alhambra:

This geometry of the void—the skillful effect of pure profiles, impeccable directive lines, and uniform surfaces—reaches its peak at the level of the open ceiling, where a sharply defined square forms an aperture through which the spectator contemplates the heavens. Natural "pictures" of the firmament shaped by atmospheric phenomena—cloudy or sunny sky, starry night, etc.—succeed one another within the limits of this empty square. Hence the puzzling title of Turrell's work that actually plays a crucial role in the semantic of the building.<sup>43</sup>

Pentcheva makes this description relevant for her case study of Hagia Sophia in relation to the concept of *poikilia*, that is, the organized multisensory spectacle of the phenomenal changes and variability of design, space, and sound in the architecture. Her rendition of my analysis of Turrell's piece unfortunately contains a fundamental conceptual confusion (underscored in italics) that needs to be rectified for the sake of comprehension of the phenomenological method and consistency with the original text:

A contemporary artwork will serve as an example of the issues engaged by aesthetic phenomenology. James Turrell's piece of sculpture/architecture "Space That Sees" (1992) is a room without a ceiling, in which the sky appears like a framed painting. When clouds pass by birds fly overhead, they animate the interior and make it perform a "representation" of the sky in front of the viewer that is *phenomenal, not pictorial*. The object-space thus functions as an imagistic engine, using variable natural phenomena to produce images, while simultaneously stimulating the viewer's imagination. In effect, Hagia Sophia offers a similar performative paradigm.<sup>44</sup>

The confusing point is that in aesthetic phenomenology the quality of being phenomenal is immanent to any perceptual material, be it natural or artificial, pictorial, or other. Therefore, thus put in opposition to the adjective “pictorial,” the term “phenomenal” is misused and misleading. What exactly occurs in Turrell’s piece is that the imaging phenomenality of the ceiling results from a deliberate optical effect produced by the *natural phenomena* seen through the neatly framed square aperture, and not by *pictorial phenomena* partaking of the architectural structure. The opposition is consequently between natural and pictorial phenomena, not at all between the phenomenal and the pictorial. By inference, had the ceiling comprised an actual pictorial representation of the described patterns, this representation would still be phenomenal. In this case the representation would be described as “pictorially phenomenal.” Last, I must address the June 2012 *Journal of Art Historiography* issue, dedicated to “Islamic Art Historiography.”<sup>45</sup> The latest account to date of the discipline’s legacy and desirable future, this issue attests to this poor state of affairs of critical inquiry.

### The Attitude to Aesthetics in the Latest Islamic Art Historiography

Significantly, in this issue only one essay by Wendy Shaw, “The Islam in Islamic Art History: Secularism and Public Discourse,” discusses the necessity of the philosophical-aesthetic approach. Yet it does so rather indirectly as it mainly focuses on another important problem, the secularization of the discourse on Islamic art. In her conclusion, Shaw appropriately writes,

Far from simply a formal resemblance, the philosophical similarities between Islamic philosophy and post-structuralism apparently emerge from shared philosophical roots. Thus methodologies rooted in post-structuralism, and refracted through Islamic philosophical lenses, might prove a more appropriate model than the Enlightenment-inspired positivist parameters that continue to dominate the scientific premises of Islamic art historical interpretation.<sup>46</sup>

One would expect further input along these lines in Gülru Necipoğlu’s contribution in which she preconizes fresh directions of research for a “modern” construction of Islamic art studies.<sup>47</sup> Given the epistemological nature of this essay, it is imperative to delve into its claims and prescriptions.

*“THE CONCEPT OF ISLAMIC ART: INHERITED DISCOURSES AND NEW APPROACHES,” BY GÜLRU NECİPOĞLU*

Necipoğlu’s vision of future research offers everything except modernization. Instead it reinstates some traditional methods erected as the scholarly

orthodoxy while covertly undermining the aesthetic-critical inquiry. Given the essay's ambition and scope, and that the views it fosters, although not unanimously agreed upon, represent a solid trend in the discipline, it compels further comment.<sup>48</sup>

First, the poor visibility given to aesthetic hermeneutic in this art historian's agenda for the future of Islamic art studies is compounded by a limp presentation of the practice of art criticism or applied aesthetics. The latter appears listed amongst a series of methods that are epistemologically very diverse, all put in the same box loosely labeled "the contextualizing trend": "avenues of research are increasingly emphasizing contextual factors ranging from questions of agency (of patrons, artists, or ecology) and modes of artistic creation and reception, to socio-political, religio-cultural, and aesthetic dimensions of the production of meaning and value. This contextualising trend has also promoted ..."<sup>49</sup> One may wonder then, what are the noncontextual factors and how is one to conceptualize anything that is not contextual and not contextualizing if the "modes of artistic creation and reception," and "aesthetic dimensions of the production of meaning" are merely contextualizing contextual factors?

Second, ambiguity surrounds this notion of "aesthetic dimensions." Is it to be understood as just the equivalent of an artwork's quality of beauty or more inclusively as its capital of visual qualities and perceptual cognitivity in the aesthetic philosophical sense? The vagueness in the definition of essential critical tropes reaches another level with this foggy contention about phenomenology: "More recently, 'thing theory' has started to bring the phenomenology of objects to the centre of art historical inquiry, thereby counterbalancing the 'power of images' with the 'potency of the object.'"<sup>50</sup> This misinformed use of the terms "phenomenology" and "the thing" in this statement delivers a misleading idea about what the phenomenological thought and practice consists of.<sup>51</sup> At least as defined in the philosophical literature designated with the word "phenomenology," the "power of images" and the "potency of the object" are by no means counterbalanced in phenomenological exploration of any sort. For "the thing" in question can be indifferently any object, image, statue, vase, edifice, while those attributes, "power" and "potency," refer to various phenomena of meaning production, communication, representation, cognitivity, and consciousness at the very heart of the phenomenological examination.

Given these unsteady premises, it is no surprise that Necipoğlu narrows the hermeneutic outcomes of the aesthetic investigation to the lesser task of correcting the shallowness and ideological slippages of the evaluation of the beauty level of Islamic artifacts, while confusing the method with a pure theory with no real grip on the objects' reality: "the current art historical interest in cross-cultural aesthetics and visual autonomy may add new levels of theoretical sophistication to purely aesthetic evaluations of Islamic art,

which continue to prosper and sometimes resonate with neo-Orientalistic orientations.”<sup>52</sup>

In sharp contrast, Necipoğlu emphatically promotes as “new approaches” the very established research on the context of art making, use, and display pertaining to the broad category of the sociology and anthropology of art. For example, “The topic of gift exchange and diplomacy, in particular, is a rich venue of research that can bridge the museum, art history, and social history.”<sup>53</sup> One-sided and seldom refreshing, these preconizations are instead in logical continuity with the overemphasizing of “the concept of Islamic art” as a social-historical object at the expense of its aesthetic (as we defined it), poetic, philosophical, and spiritual essence. The conclusion is particularly revealing of this pattern:

To conclude, neither architectural monuments, nor portable luxury goods produced in courtly or commercial urban workshops of the Islamic lands were meant for display in museums as self-referential objects d’art or masterpieces. Instead, they were often seen *en masse* and experienced in particular settings or rituals that framed their signification process. The functionality, materiality, and “thingness” of portable objects—often exchanged as gifts and commodities—meant that their semantic horizons were largely dependent on context.<sup>54</sup>

If there is a need to further delve into the original context of the use of Islamic artworks and improve the modes of their display accordingly, situating the main source of their meaning in their social environment and utilitarian finality engenders a series of disquieting connotations between art and ordinary objecthood, creation and commodity, and aesthetic quality and material beauty or luxury. What amounts to a Marxist-izing functionalist conception of art in Islam is particularly inappropriate for book culture and painting. Although together with calligraphy, the art with which it is paired, painting indeed belongs to this anthropological-social category of “portable objects,” this category includes a great diversity of items of variegated use, purpose, and cognitive-aesthetic reach, from jewels, garments, wares, and furniture, to Qur’ans and illustrated books of poetry and literature. In monolithically foregrounding the political, economic, and social impulse of the production of these objects mostly seen “*en masse*,” Necipoğlu commodifies manuscripts and albums of paintings and calligraphies like any luxury item.

This excessive functionalism has the undesirable effect of depoetizing, trivializing, and despiritualizing highly polysemic artistic complexities of profound poetic, philosophic, and spiritual essence and dimension. In addition, the social-functional argument passes over the crucial fact that many of these objects were intended for a multifaceted and multilevel experience at both the collective and individual level. Some artifacts such as albums of calligraphy or illustrated poetry were mainly enjoyed in the intimacy of a small group of selected people as well as in a lone individual’s strict privacy

for an undisturbed encounter with the aesthetic object. In forgetting to mention this crucial aspect of artistic consumption in the Islamic context, the article somehow suggests that the consumers and customers of these artworks were primarily motivated by materialistic and instrumentalist desires, and did not possess the genuine aesthetic sense and acute sensitivity necessary to engage in the penetrating experience of the art that inner contemplation allows. It is this one-track view focused on context, function, and history in the interpretation of Islamic visual forms that ultimately leads Necipoğlu to untenably refute the works' self-referential property. We have already discussed this aesthetic ontological principle of art in theoretical terms, but let us illustrate it with concrete examples.

If we consider a celebrated piece such as the *Ardabil Carpet* at the Victoria and Albert Museum that was conceived as a masterpiece, not utilitarian rug, could we say that being removed from the Sufi Shrine where Shah Ismail (the founder of the Safavid dynasty in 1501) had placed it has diminished its aesthetic power, substance, and status? Whether in context or not, the carpet is an exceptional realization, and the greatest part of its artistic content and meaning is safely deposited and embedded in the physical object's forms and aesthetic system. If displacement in space and time entails change and variation in the work's mode of stimulating cognitivity, it does not eradicate its fundamental ontological potency to function "as a self-referential object d'art or masterpiece."

In fact, the more sophisticated and aesthetically powerful the art is, the richer its inner life and the stronger its resistance to the semantic alterations that the shifts and fluctuations of contingency may generate. And to extend this reasoning to our object of interest, pictorial art, I do not see why Persian or Mughal miniatures should not be scholarly apprehended like Fan Kuan's or Johannes Vermeer's paintings, considered both cultural signifiers and masterpieces of trans-spatiotemporal dimensions. For example, could we assert that out of the context of the Song dynasty the Chinese artist's monochromatic landscapes cease to emanate their philosophic aura and no longer invite us to reflect upon Nature, the Human, and the Divine? Or, did Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* lose most of its meaning the day it left the homey intimacy of a small seventeenth-century Dutch house in Delft to sink into oblivion and resurface centuries later to end up in a public cultural institution exposed to the gaze of ordinary people and experts from all over the world? Could we not even contend that, on the contrary, such exposure throughout time has actually helped uncover the scope of the portrait's significance and unearthed its inner aesthetic substance, which the painter's contemporaries probably could not fully grasp? Why then not recognize equally in some Islamic masterpieces and Persian or Mughal pictorial works the same capacity to self-signify and live beyond context?<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, Necipoğlu's article, quite in contradiction with the unknowingly Marxist-like orientation of some of its arguments, betrays culturocentric anxieties that it seems to me mandatory to suppress for a proper understanding of what the present book is about.<sup>56</sup> This pattern is manifest in the dismissal of the value of the transcultural qualities Islamic art may convey. Criticizing the endeavor to underscore these qualities in some exhibitions and museums, Necipoğlu laments, "Such decontextualised displays privilege the transcultural qualities of Islamic objects over their latent role as bearers of meaning, a universalising tendency that is coloured by the modernist concept of visual autonomy."

As phrased, this statement opposes "transcultural qualities" to features of "meaning," as if these qualities were not only superficial and insignificant but also misleading. In thus denying transcultural qualities their semantic role in the artwork's aesthetic system, Necipoğlu encloses Islamic art in a quasi-impermeable cultural box and severs or considerably reduces its ties to other global and historical artistic productions. Against the contemporary critical stream, she clings to the old idea that the transcultural compromises the original intracultural and the global, the local, thus misinterpreting these rich dialectical complementarities as splitting dichotomies of unequal value.

Other confusions call for rectification. While misunderstanding the legitimate hermeneutic process of showing the extent of an art's capital of meaning beyond its original contextual boundaries as reductionist essentialization, Necipoğlu wrongly associates the concept of "visual autonomy," or an art's ontological property of self-referentiality, with the historical "modernist" approach of it. Let us repeat, whether we deal with the modernist principle of "art for art's sake" (*l'art pour l'art*) promoted in Modern Europe or the transcultural-transaesthetic conception of "art with a functional purpose of whatever order," self-referentiality is inherent to the aesthetic object just by virtue of its ontology. The "modernist concept of visual autonomy" indeed derives from and consciously relies on this transcendental ontological capacity of the art to be self-referential and autonomous, but the two data—namely, the art's ontological self-referentiality and the use of this property in Modern art's European historical context—remain distinct topics entrusted to the same principle.

Alast word must be said about this art historian's caution against the religious topic of Islam that springs from both her commodifying vision of the arts in this area and a culturocentric suspicion of phenomena of transculturalism. She thus warns, "Pan-Islamic thematic displays recently embraced in several museum installations and temporary exhibitions are particularly problematic because they reinforce stereotypes about the essential 'character' or 'spirit' of Islamic art transcending time and space."

According to this statement, focusing on the Islamic content of artwork and the linkages it may establish between different regional cultures of

different periods amounts to espousing a form of ideology or to a subjective penchant for “pan-Islamism.” To not fall into this trap we, scholars and curators, are implicitly advised to avoid the topic. On the verge of censorship, this deontological attitude erects Islam as taboo, and that is the last thing we should wish nowadays.

Moreover, very importantly for the sake of a proper comprehension of the art itself, this restriction imposes unacceptable limitations to the study of some objects whose religious and spiritual dimensions may be hidden, potential, or latent but nevertheless present. This semantic ought to be retrieved and exposed, and deserves as much attention as the apparent or observable religious meaning. For in parallel with more didactic and direct expressions of the faith, a great deal of Islamic art subtly articulates the secular, the religious, and the spiritual in multilayered aesthetic constructions variously combinable and deliberately open to individualized interpretations and projections.<sup>57</sup> For example, paintings and calligraphies that are apparently secular, that is, with no objective religious subject matter, may nevertheless metaphorically or by subtle suggestion and stimulus deliver an Islamic thought, arouse mystic feelings, or invite metaphysical meditations subtended by faith. Although open to debate and prone to varying interpretation, at least the phenomenon exists; therefore, it naturally commands research. As Wendy Shaw rightly remarks, “Similarly dismissing the possibility of faith-based interpretation offered in the Hayward Gallery thesis, Gülru Necipoğlu reasserts the secular terms of Islamic art historical practice by seeking a solution to the temporo-geographical limitations at work in the field today through a new pan-cultural periodization paralleling those of Western art history (late antique/early-medieval; medieval/late-medieval; early modern; and modern/contemporary).”<sup>58</sup>

This resistance to applied aesthetics and art criticism has another deep root in what is the result of this univocal approach based on context—namely, an exclusive attachment to period texts that partly motivates the epistemological delegitimization of art theory and Western aesthetic philosophy in this field of studies.

### **Problematic Use of Primary Sources**

The idea underpinning the exclusivity given to period texts is that there exists an “Islamic” literature on art and aesthetics and, therefore, one need not consult written sources external to the world of Islam. This research strategy is considered anachronistic by some, out of place and irrelevant to this cultural sphere. One way to deconstruct this reasoning is to evaluate the hermeneutic dimension of period literature for the study of Islamic art. But I will narrow this evaluation only to the material relevant to painting.

The Persian sources that formed the core of the Mughal textual culture, and the Mughal writings produced in India itself are dealt with separately in the two consecutive sections below.

*THE TRUTH IN PERSIAN TEXTS ABOUT PAINTING*

This heading intentionally evokes the title of Jacques Derrida's famous book *The Truth in Painting*, and alludes to his other works relevant to art, such as *Of Grammatology*.<sup>59</sup> Reflection upon Derrida's writings invariably leads one to wonder whether what they say about truth in painting and art is true, and whether they can concretely elucidate artistic practice, at least in Western culture. For example, is it true that in art it is "the represented and not the representer, the expressed and not the expression, that matters"?<sup>60</sup> Would Claude Monet have agreed with this statement and confirmed that in his oeuvre the subject matter, say, the Cathedral of Rouen, is more important than the manner and means by which it is painted? And how does this statement fit conceptual pieces such as Joseph Kosuth's works, Jasper Johns's painted American flag, or Marcel Duchamp's *Urinoir*?

Clearly, artistic visuality is more versatile and slippery than Derrida's claim suggests. Furthermore, is not Derrida's celebrated aphorism "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" ("there is nothing outside the text" or "there is no outside-text") in contradiction with this very statement quoted above, if we correctly understand that "text" is primarily "language" generically speaking, either verbal or pictorial or else?<sup>61</sup> If the represented cannot exist without and outside what expresses it—namely, language or the representer—then what matters more, the representer/language or the expressed/represented through it?

The key question is how could/did art historians, theorists, critics, and artists make use of Derrida's thought? Despite its contradictions and sometimes inadequate account for the ontology of art, Derrida's aesthetic philosophy had tremendous resonance in the intellectual and artistic milieus of his time and afterwards. This is, however, not because his writings were taken literally as some form of truth, but because they exposed questions fundamental to any creative expression that one could ruminate about and draw conclusions from depending on one's practice and interests. In other words, Derrida—like other post-structuralist and postmodern thinkers on art and aesthetics—did not solve a problem and did not dictate a doctrine about art making. Instead, he contributed decisively to the intellectual framework of artistic culture for an entire period, and therein resides the validity of his dicta.<sup>62</sup> This means, by extension, that it would be vain to seek direct or literal explanations of art itself in Derrida's philosophy. Yet, provided it is understood that knowledge of intellectual culture is essential for, but not equal to, knowing art, surely

Derrida constitutes an inescapable reference in the critical investigation of art and visuality in the West and beyond.

This is also precisely the way Islamic-Persian primary sources should be approached for the study of Persianate painting.<sup>63</sup> Unlike the literature from other cultural areas such as Renaissance Europe or China's aesthetic texts known for their direct analytical relationship with the praxis, the Persian sources are paradoxically enlightening and obscuring for the art historian/critic. Although these sources do contain a rich philosophy and mythology about art, they do not address frontally the aesthetic mechanisms and creative strategies implemented in the plastic practice itself. The aesthetic substance of the paradigmatic stories about mimesis and portraiture, including the myth of the prophet-painter Mani, the romance of Shirin and Khusraw, the contest between the Greek and the Chinese artist, and other analogous well-known narratives, consists essentially of ideational elaborations operating exclusively at an abstract philosophical level.<sup>64</sup> The concepts of likeness and portrait in this narrative-mythological context implicate a relationship between the reality and its image only in thought, and as such they remain a "reality thought of" or a "reality in thought" (*réalité pensée*) detached from its actual projection, realization, and materialization in the imagistic forms. The hermeneutic value of these stories for elucidating art only lies in the conceptualization of a vision, visuality, and the world of forms they convey within particular metaphysics and ethics, analogous to Plato's or Descartes's speculations about the relationship of representation and the visible.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, enlightening only to some extent is the medieval Arabic-Persian philosophy imbued with Neoplatonism, in particular the abstract aesthetic themes such as the duality *batin/zahir* (latent/apparent, concealed/revealed) or the general ethical theories on perceptual appearances positing the superiority of inner over sensory experience famously championed by al-Ghazali (1058–1111).<sup>66</sup> These philosophic elements, combined with Islamic iconoclastic themes, have been evoked to explicate the preference for idealistic and two-dimensional forms in Islamic visual culture, in particular the remarkable development of aniconic plastic expressions.<sup>67</sup> Yet, as lively a philosophical stream as this textual material may have been in the pre-Modern and Modern period, it does not reflect the artistic practice itself that was undergoing constant experimentation, diversification, and renewal throughout the Persianate area from the Middle Ages onward. By the same token, the philosophy-based hierarchy in these texts between the scriptural and figural modes of expression has become somehow remote from reality in the sense that it has not kept up with the ever-growing importance of visuality and images in the early Modern Persianate aesthetic consciousness.<sup>68</sup>

At a more profound level, beyond its attachment to long-established values, this consciousness has actually evolved as it manifested more and more "ocularcentric" inclinations through the astonishing efflorescence of

visual forms and their increasing presence in the cultural landscape and artistic life.<sup>69</sup> To give just one example of this subterranean evolution of consciousness, the very function of painting has progressively changed, steadily acquiring greater visibility by getting out of the enclosed confines of the codex's scriptural space to acquire full plastic autonomy. By the fifteenth century, full-page imageries coexisted with calligraphies in albums. We know that in the sixteenth century paintings were used as commemorative objects, especially commissioned for display during grand occasions such as the Nawruz (the Persian new year).<sup>70</sup> In fact, the frequent invocation of this hierarchy of cultural practices in Persianate texts has to do more with an intellectual reflex of safeguarding a prestigious heritage, an *habitus* in the sense Pierre Bourdieu gave to this term, than with a practical application of an inflexible conceptual order of things by which the superior world of thought and writing would immutably dominate the inferior world of visual creation.<sup>71</sup> This *habitus* underscores more broadly the duration of the medieval Arabic-Persian intellectual tradition throughout the Modern ages in the Persianate world, comparable, in terms of cultural weight, to the classical Greco-Roman heritage in the West. Through the continuous reactualization of this textual heritage, the intellectual validity of the corpus dedicated to aesthetic themes has been prolonged despite not following the reality of the evolution and transformations of the cultural-artistic activities themselves. As a result, this traditional literature has progressively lost its impact on the concrete terrain of art making and visuality shaping, while remaining a thoroughly relevant signifier of intellectual culture.

Furthermore, it is consensually admitted that when read in parallel with the artworks themselves, these philosophical and religious writings evoking artistic creation often appear elliptic or even confusing in many aspects, including the texts materially related to paintings and drawings. For example, David Roxburgh rightly noted that the discourse of the Persian albums' prefaces stresses the mimetic attitude of the painters, but "Clearly we cannot take the artist's action of copying what he sees in the world literally because the aesthetic features of the Persianate pictorial tradition cannot be equated with a literal translation of what is seen as a form of optical naturalism."<sup>72</sup> Another scholar, Yves Porter, who has researched Persian literature relevant to art, has concluded that Persian aesthetic philosophy combines two opposed currents: the tradition of Ancient Iran inclined toward figurative representation and the Islamic tradition inclined toward iconoclasm. His critical reading of the information Porter gathered from these sources is contained in one observation: "In this cultural area, portraiture and the figural arts in general are the product of a compromise."<sup>73</sup>

Yet, despite these discrepancies and contradictions, these texts are still taken at face value like sanctified scripture wherein answers to all artistic questionings are to be found in one way or another. Most of the scholars simply

cannot fathom that at some point the response to aesthetic problems may not reside in these textual materials but in the art itself, and that the systematic reliance on the written as the source of aesthetic information may eventually reach a dead end. Obstinate, the same references to Mani, Neoplatonic *falsafa* (philosophy), Al-Ghazali, and so on, are used and abused to supposedly analyze Persianate art whose forms are in fact extremely diverse. Such an excessive trust in primary sources has unavoidably engendered shortcomings.

First, the repetition of the same literary references over and over again not only leaves the fundamental diversity of the Persianate pictorial plasticity unexplained, beyond stylistic descriptions, but it has misled some scholars to view the productions outside the Iranian area as just Persian avatars.<sup>74</sup> For example, Gregory Minissale contended, “there is no reason to suspect that the Mughals, who shared the intellectual culture and environment of the Persian courts, possessed an aesthetic vision that differed greatly.”<sup>75</sup> In the following chapters it will become clear that this is quite incorrect. This pan-Iranian vision of Mughal artistic culture overlooks the profoundly transformative role of the local Indo-Islamic legacy in the shaping of the Mughal artistic idiom, let alone the specific Mughal reception of European art.

Second, this reliance on texts has yielded again to this problematic prioritization of the contextualizing analyses over visual hermeneutic and the tendency to look for answers to questions raised by the artifacts’ aesthetic somewhere other than in the artistic practice and philosophy themselves. If systematic contextual and textual exploration has entailed a fair knowledge of Persianate courtly culture thanks to information provided by texts and images, problematically this achievement has been confused with the comprehension of the art. It has not been realized yet that favoring texts and contexts over forms equates to seeking in the art what may illuminate the culture instead of fairly combining this diverse material together for the sake of understanding art, which is in principle one of the main goals of art history.

Third, placing written and socio-cultural evidence at the center of the process of construing artworks necessarily leaves unattended or poorly investigated some of their aspects that this evidence cannot confirm or clarify, as well as those aspects that do not fit or challenge the intellectual logic underpinning the texts.<sup>76</sup> Scholarship on Persianate portraiture is exemplary of this problematic epistemic phenomenon.

*THE STUDY OF PERSIANATE PORTRAITURE: LOOKING AT TEXTS AND CONTEXTS VERSUS  
LOOKING AT PORTRAITS*

In her seminal essays on the Persian literature about art and portraiture, Priscilla Soucek recommended seeking “which aspects of the culture might have nurtured and encouraged its development [of the portrait genre]. Although cognizance must be given to the role of religious values in shaping

attitudes toward portraiture, other cultural factors need to be considered in order to create a more balanced understanding of the question. Textual descriptions which testify to the 'intensified power' of portraits to evoke the presence of an individual are also admissible in such a reconstruction."<sup>77</sup>

Soucek also recognizes that "when 'local tradition' describes something as a 'portrait,' the goal should be to understand how that type of portraiture functioned."<sup>78</sup> It seems however that this second recommendation has not been fully considered, as these portraits still await an adequate investigation since the essay's publication in 2000. The precise cognitive status and aesthetic conceptualization of human representation in the variegated Persianate societies remains nowadays as opaque as ever. Similarly, the exact terms of the compromise Porter left for us to guess in 1995 have not been sorted out as yet. Consequently, if the studies contextualize well the Persianate portrait genre in the broader framework of socio-cultural practices, their mode of commenting does not fully succeed in unraveling the creative principles and philosophy of human representation it engages.<sup>79</sup> A critique of the latest article by Kishwar Rizvi on "the suggestive" portrait of Shah 'Abbas in the *Shahnama* manuscripts will illustrate concretely this state of affairs and also provide a useful preliminary to our study of the Mughal portrait in the last chapter of this book.<sup>80</sup>

*THE SUGGESTIVE PORTRAIT OF SHAH 'ABBAS, BY KISHWAR RIZVI*

The vague term "suggestive" is meant to describe a particular instance of portraiture that is not immediately detectable for the viewers of today as it consists of what I identify as a disguised representation, more exactly a double image (Fig. 1). The portrait in question indeed uses the archetypal depiction of one of the epic's heroes, Rustam, to which some of Shah 'Abbas's physical traits and personal attributes have been given. In itself, this specific mode of portraiture of resorting to an intermediary and superimposing reality on myth and the present on the past would command a thorough aesthetic-critical reflection, all the more so in that it coexists with the realistic likeness of the same ruler, Shah 'Abbas, produced by a Mughal painter that Jahangir had sent to the Safavid court for that very purpose<sup>81</sup> (Fig. 2). Yet, following the scholarship's customs, and as Priscilla Soucek had prescribed twelve years earlier, Rizvi concentrates her attention on the painting's general cultural milieu to find clues about the *raison d'être* of this unprecedented phenomenon of the Safavid sovereign's perceptually identifiable portrait.

In the construction of this essay, the critical analysis only serves as an introduction to the main contextual inquiry. To frame Shah 'Abbas's pictorial novelty in relation to the absence of royal physiognomic depiction in the period preceding his reign, Rizvi reports, "Art historians have noted that early Safavid painting is remarkable for its resistance to verisimilitude."<sup>82</sup> From a



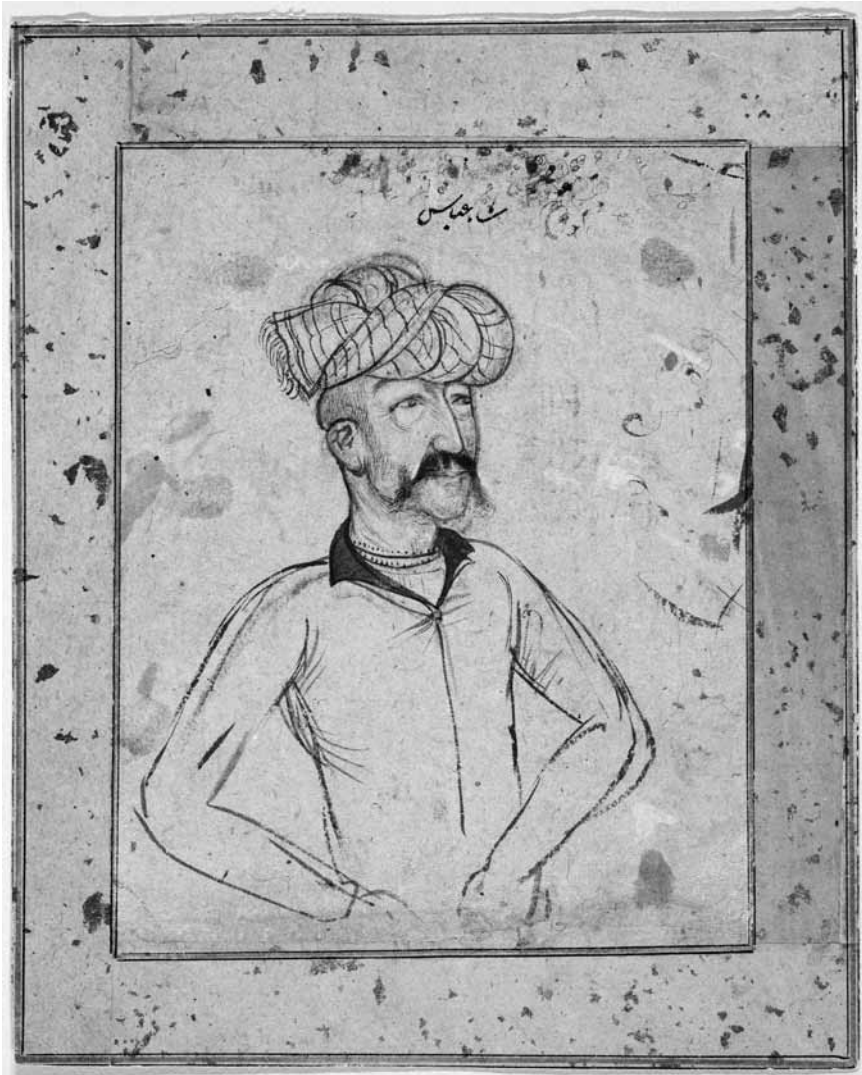
1 *Gushtasp and the Dragon of Mount Sakila*, 1605, from the *Shahnama* (*Book of Kings*) by Firdawsi. Iran. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper.  
Property of Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz

critical viewpoint this statement is problematic. While we might read the term “resistance” as a figure of speech to talk about “the absence of” this feature, it nevertheless misleads since it implies an intent and a creative logic that simply did not guide the evolution of Persianate portraiture.

Indeed, if we understand that the act of resisting signifies consciously not accepting a rule or a mode imposed or predicated as the right thing to do, “a resistance to verisimilitude” would consequently mean that the resembling portrait had become a model to take inspiration from, a criterion established by some kind of aesthetic order upon which one ought to construe Safavid human representation in the early Modern Persianate world. The Safavids would thus have deliberately rejected this new aesthetic order or model until Shah ‘Abbas decided otherwise. As we know, imperial physiognomic portraiture became the norm in Akbar’s Mughal Empire. However, also well known is that each of the variegated Persianate societies, from the Timurid era onwards, developed a different conception of portraiture premised upon aesthetic-philosophical inclinations internal to each polity’s artistic practice and tradition. In this structure of artistic events within the Persianate world, the Mughal imperial physiognomic likeness constitutes an Indian particularity but not necessarily a model positing some form of achievement in the portrait genre in absolute.

These data unsettle Rizvi’s main argument that the Safavids would have based this supposed “resistance” to the dynastic portrait true to nature on specific socio-religious scruples; a reluctance that still would be manifest through the “suggestive” mode of Shah ‘Abbas’s portraiture and would rely on an alleged hierarchical aesthetic principle according to which “attaining a physical likeness was secondary to portraying the attributes of the king.”<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, the hypothesis that their semidivine status would have conditioned the Safavid dynasts’ unwillingness or lack of interest to be physically portrayed is not very solid.<sup>84</sup> How then to explain that Shah ‘Abbas, as a very pious Safavid representative himself, did not show the same concerns in consenting to display his recognizable portrait and allowing a Mughal painter to produce his live physiognomic image?

Above all, these unsteady hypotheses are underpinned by a conviction stemming from the teachings of traditional Western art history positing that, transcendently, a fully accomplished portrait faithfully resembles the represented individual’s physical traits. By extension, these hypotheses presuppose that all other forms of portraiture are just steps in the process of reaching this level of accomplishment; hence any aesthetic choice deviating or diverging from this conceptual trajectory is construed as a resistance or a surprising move, particularly if contextually it appears as a countercurrent to other artistic trends embracing the concept of naturalism in human representation such as in Mughal painting (Figs. 2–3, 6, 10, 17, 40). But such logic is inadequate for the study of Safavid painting and analogous pictorial systems that do not conceptualize physiognomic resemblance as the criterion



2 *Portrait of Shah 'Abbas I*, attributed to Bishndas, c. 1617. Mughal India. Ink and opaque watercolor on paper. Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum. Courtesy of Imaging Department. © President and Fellows of Harvard College

determining what a portrait consists of, not even at a “secondary” level, and that instead privilege broader notions related to the concept of likeness such as presence, visibility, identity, or processes of individual identification other than physiognomic recognition. These processes may include symbols and a great variety of semiotic iconographic codes.<sup>85</sup>

This preconceived perception led Rizvi to consider Shah ‘Abbas’s likeness the manifestation of an emerging rather than evolutionary phenomenon. As a result, her presentation of the portrait within the history of Persianate painting does not take into account the other forms of dynastic representation that preceded it and subtended its advent. Before Shah ‘Abbas’s reign, Rizvi argues, textual and visual representation did not cohere, inasmuch as texts describe with abundance of detail the sovereign’s individuality, whereas physiognomic portrayal is absent in Safavid painting. But while her observation suggests that portraiture in general did not exist in Safavid art until Shah ‘Abbas came to power, Rizvi establishes a link between this ruler’s representation and the presence of previous Safavid dynasts’ names in inscriptions inserted in book imagery, and farther in the past the idealized Timurid portraits. As she sees in these inscriptions a form of portraiture, Rizvi posits them as the missing link between the Timurid portraits and Shah ‘Abbas’s likeness. She explains,

In the Safavid period, one of the most remarkable paintings is found in a 1526 history of the Shi’i imams ... which alludes to Shah Tahmasb, the ruler at the time. In the *First Sermon of Hasan ibn ‘Ali in Madina*, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad is seen sitting in the pulpit of the Great Mosque in Madina. Above the haloed figure is a foundation script praising the Safavid Shah, whose name is highlighted and placed directly above that of the imam. The conflation of mythic or historical figures with contemporary rulers fits well into the Iranian tradition of what may be called “a suggestive” portrait.<sup>86</sup>

Yet, this good intuition about some continuity rather than discontinuity between Timurid and Safavid portraiture is undermined by the misunderstanding of the aesthetic ontology of the inscriptions in question and their precise weight on the whole historical argument. Although certain forms of Timurid human representation and Shah ‘Abbas’s mimetic image unambiguously pertain to the portrait category, by no means do these inscriptions do likewise. In the painting discussed there is no conflation of figures, and the imagistic and linguistic expressions do not represent each other. The combination of Shah Tahmasp’s (or Tahmasb’s) written name with the imam’s figuration cannot be defined as a portrait, not even by suggestion. Instead, the linkage between the holy man and the inscription is of a purely semantic order. The two different individuals denoted by the two different means of writing and figuration appear bound both visually and semantically by their placement in the image in order to construct a half-imagistic half-linguistic postulate. This postulate is crystal-clear. It recalls the genealogical

relationship between the two individuals referring to the Safavid dynasty's claim of lineage from the Prophet Muhammad's family. As we know, painting and other cultural media frequently express this central element of the Safavid political-religious discourse. In the illustrated manuscript Rizvi talks about, the inscription itself cannot be considered in terms of equivalency with a written portrait of the Shah, since it just names the person with no description. In short, those epigraphic instances, customary in Persianate painting whether or not they contain portraits, do not support Rizvi's reasoning.

If we eliminate this epigraphic evocation of Shah Tahmasp, the article mentions no other occurrence of portraiture that would suggest that Shah 'Abbas's Safavid predecessors would have engaged in some kind of visual self-representation. It implies by induction that Safavid dynastic portraiture did not really exist before Shah 'Abbas's reign, a view confirmed by this remark about the incoherence between texts full of information about the monarch's personality contrasting with the muteness of the figuration in the period of the first four Safavid monarchs. Confronted with this dead end in the aesthetic argument, Rizvi then switches to the contextual exploration to seek the causes of the apparition of Shah 'Abbas's portrait that, she suspects, are to be found in his personal socio-religious and political preoccupations and actions.

In relying on the iconographic evidence of the sovereign depicted in prayer surrounded by Shi'i objects of piety, she attributes the artistic novelty to the religious-cultural changes that occurred during his reign in the context of rivalry with the Ottomans and the Mughals. Shah 'Abbas had indeed marked his time with the displacement of the capital to Isfahan, which he had spectacularly refurbished with impressive religious buildings conveying special significance and symbolism in the expression of both the Shi'i faith and the Safavid dynasty's political status. However, if Shah 'Abbas's political reconstruction of the Safavid State and reshaping of Shi'ism into a more extravert religious expression were certainly part of his reign's general dynamic of artistic creation and sponsorship, they explain only very partially this new inclusion of some physiognomic traits of the sovereign in the *Shahnama* illustrations. We should instead say that together with this inclusion these cultural novelties form a conjunction of acts participating in the period's cultural construct and dynamic. They are not the direct cause of this pictorial move that is fundamentally of an aesthetic nature and that above all rests upon the positive existence of a Persian tradition of dynastic self-representation using the pictorial medium.

Indeed, Safavid painting did develop a fully operational mode of depicting the ruler before Shah 'Abbas's era; a tradition subsequently enriched with this specific innovation of the recognizable likeness by insertion of the monarch's perceptual features in Rustam's portrayal. Just a quick examination of the aesthetic phenomenology and cognitivity of the *Shahnamah's* illustrated

codex as object of artistic-literary experience can prove that Shah 'Abbas's recognizable likeness is not as different from his predecessors' pictorial habits as Rizvi presents it. Although she does sensitively intuit it, she attaches only a superficial importance to the major fact that this new instance of portraiture is primarily an outcome of the inner functioning of the *Shahnama's* painted copies. As we know again, since its very conception in 1010 Firdawsi's epic work has always served as a mode of royal portraiture of some kind. The very designation of the opus, the "mirror of kings," clearly signals its representational function utilizing the poetic power of reflexivity and metaphor to construct a royal image. Simply put, the regal users of the *Shahnama* would see their own reflection in the literary models and paradigms of kingship and heroism.<sup>87</sup> These reflections constituted a first type of royal imagery, a type of *performed* portraiture that produces mental metaphorical likenesses I generically designate "the event portrait," as opposed to "the apparent portrait" in the painted matter; a terminology I borrowed from the physicist Stephen Hawking in his latest exposé on black hole theory.<sup>88</sup>

With the illustration of the book the mirroring or reflexive process reached another level of materialization leading to the creation of performed and visualized metaphorical portraits. In all Persianate societies, reading, performing, and visualizing the painted codex would activate mental associations and projections effecting the identification between a given king-hero of Firdawsi's epic, its painted image in the experienced artifact, and the living royal beholder's character, ultimately engendering a performed visualizing metaphorical portrait albeit not an apparent instance of it. The representation of the pious living king would thus be performed, instituted, and constituted at each enactment and visualization of a selected *Shahnama* story with the support of an illustrated manuscript. Although not yet defined in perceptual terms of physiognomic likeness, this "event portrait," a mentally constructed form of portraiture by analogy, was however operational at the semantic and semiotic level of political-religious-ethical expressiveness and no less associated with the actual king's personality and individuality.

In his 2008 novel *The Enchantress of Florence* involving the historic figure of the Mughal emperor Akbar, Salman Rushdie beautifully describes this complex but very effective strategy of portrait construction. In talking about a court painter who illustrated the *Hamzanama* (*The Tales of Hamza*, the uncle of Prophet Muhammad), Rushdie notices the specific representational function of canonical books such as the *Shahnama*, *Hamzanama* or *Iskandarnama*:

Over and over again, he painted the legendary hero Hamza on his three-eyed fairy horse overcoming improbable monsters of all types, and understood better than any other artist involved in the fourteen-year-long Hamza cycle which was the atelier's pride and joy that he was painting the emperor's dream-autobiography into being, that although his hand held the brush it was the emperor's vision that was appearing on the painted cloths. An emperor was the

sum of his deeds, and Akbar's greatness, like that of his *alter ego* Hamza, was not only demonstrated by his triumphs over enormous obstacles—recalcitrant princes, real-life dragons, *devs*, and the like—it was actually created by those triumphs. The hero in Dashwanth's pictures became the emperor's mirror, ...

"Together we are painting the emperor's soul," Dashwanth told his collaborators sadly. "And when his spirit leaves his body it will come to rest in these pictures, in which he will be immortal."<sup>89</sup>

Consequently, both the original event portrait and Shah 'Abbas's apparent likeness share the same aesthetic principle consisting of superimposing the living monarch's image on the literary-pictorial depiction of another king or hero from the *Shahnama* epic. Both are indirect or "suggested" forms of portraiture, the essential difference between them residing in the aesthetic ontology and materiality of the living king's image itself. Initially metaphorical and conceptually constructed by mental association with a material image, under Shah 'Abbas's patronage this image eventually became the materialized receptor of a few painted, recognizable, attributive traits of the ruler semiotized by means of piety paraphernalia and symbols. By inference, the Safavid sovereign's visible likeness fundamentally constitutes the early Modern version of portraiture that the forever evolving art of the *Shahnama's* illustrations has produced since its creation.

In sum, what this likeness precisely signifies is that the traditional event portrait of the previous Safavid sovereigns, who were preoccupied by this issue of political-religious self-representativeness no less than Shah 'Abbas, eventually turned into material portraiture, visibly present in the illustrations although still representing the figure in an indirect manner, by interposition, in the disguise of a literary hero. The pertinent question to ask then is why did this shift of formulation of Safavid dynastic representation occur in Shah 'Abbas's period and not sooner or later?

The answer to this question resides in a combination of factors that revolves around the aesthetic fact of the new Safavid modalities of reception and appreciation of Mughal art and culture in this period. This process was informed by the relationship between the two rival dynasties, which must be explored. As Rizvi herself and other scholars acknowledge, painting under Shah 'Abbas's patronage displays an undeniable permeability to Mughal art that since Akbar's reign had made dynastic physiognomic portraiture a central visual theme. But driven by her investigation into Shah 'Abbas's political-religious enterprise, Rizvi barely touches upon the phenomenon of cross-artistic encounters between Iran, India, and Europe that appear determinative in the evolution of Persian portraiture at the beginning of the seventeenth century. A closer examination of Safavid exposure to and reception of Mughal pictorial models at Shah 'Abbas's court in conjunction with its corollary, the impact of European art, should shed more light on these decisive changes in seventeenth-century Persian painting.

*THE TRUTH IN MUGHAL TEXTS ABOUT PAINTING*

Are there primary Mughal texts that could be more explanatory about art making than the Persian sources, and do they raise similar epistemological issues? In the introduction to her essays on Mughal art, Ebba Koch evoked the existence of a disciplinary schism based on this comment made in 1998 by the reputed historian Sanjay Subrahmanyam: "Most writers on art history and architectural history accept in a relatively unquestioning manner the basic postulates on the nature and history of the Mughal State set out for them by political and social historians, on the basis of chronicles and documents; political and social historians, for their parts seem to have disdain for art history and allied disciplines."<sup>90</sup>

Ebba Koch responded to this criticism by underscoring the problem of the use of Mughal texts for the study of the arts, "Because of the independence of literary themes and their unreliable degree of relevance, which is particularly pronounced in eulogistic phraseology, each textual reference needs to be carefully evaluated and tested against the visual record before it can be used as historical evidence."<sup>91</sup>

When he wrote his acidic remark, Subrahmanyam, who is not an art historian, did not seem to be aware of this difficulty, which does not affect his own specialty, socio-historical studies. However, he rightly hinted at the real insufficiencies in the history of Mughal art regarding methodology and the approach to period sources. But what are precisely the questions the Mughal texts pose in relation to their hermeneutic potential concerning Mughal book art?

The Mughal literature evoking or talking about painting engages specific parameters of knowledge due to its textual hybridity. It comprises a substantial historical documentation, the rich pre-Islamic and non-Islamic Indic lore, the no-less-rich Islamic-Persianate miscellanies of texts and of course the variegated Mughal literary adaptations of the latter.<sup>92</sup> More particularly there exist treatises on art and dance that the Hindu artists working at the Mughal court probably knew about. However, the Mughal sources do not refer to this aspect of Indic lore concerning the artistic practice, and there is no concrete proof of the application of these texts in Mughal painting.<sup>93</sup> It is impossible to verify whether the Sanskrit treatise on painting, the *Chitrasutra* (or *Citrasutra*) in the Vishnudharmottara Purana, a Hindu encyclopedic text predating the eighth century AD, played a role in the formation of the Mughal pictorial idiom.<sup>94</sup>

On the other hand, the corpus of Mughal chronicles, princely accounts, and memoirs offers a useful and very informative resource for the study of painting as they talk about Mughal art, patronage, and artists.<sup>95</sup> The art historians naturally have thoroughly explored these writings. Yet, similarly to Persian literature, these texts constitute no clear-cut theoretical material permitting an easy elucidation of the objects' aesthetic workings. The extraction of a reliable

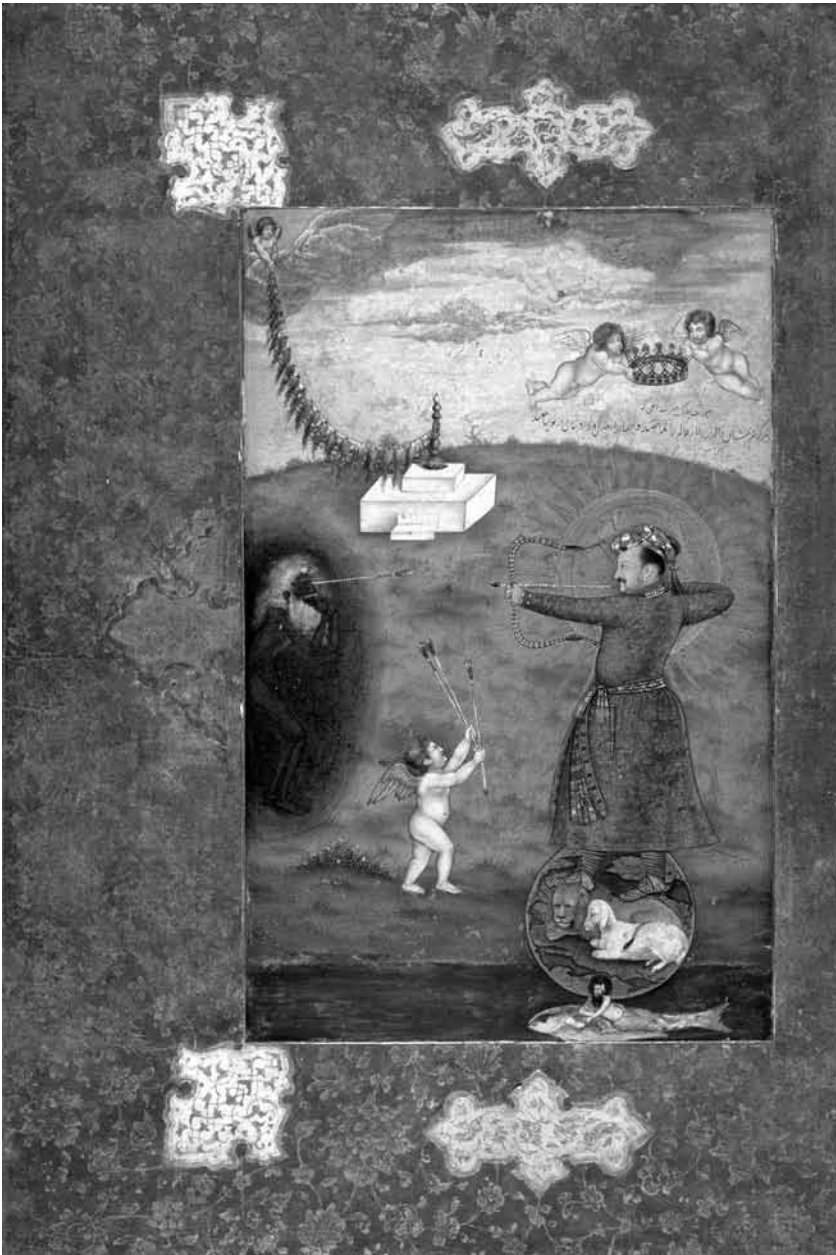
aesthetic thought from these documents also requires reading between and beyond the lines as they are not directly explanatory of the art either, or are only superficially explanatory. And yet, they do supply many clues, thanks to the lively reports and many personal reflections the emperors liked to communicate in writing themselves or by proxy.<sup>96</sup>

A cautious approach is also recommended in the use of the purely historical findings provided by the politico-cultural studies of Mughal India whose mere borrowing may be of limited aid without critical work, or may even mislead as they either do not quite grasp or just ignore the seemingly paradoxical articulation between intellectual and artistic activity. A quite conspicuous illustration of this slippery situation is the flourishing of Christian imagery at Akbar's and Jahangir's courts. This objective phenomenon appears awkward in the light of what the texts tell, at least in the particular light that the specialists of the social-cultural history of Mughal India have cast on these documentary sources.<sup>97</sup> The apparent discrepancy between, on one hand, the Mughals' solid attachment to their faith and rather unimpressed attitude toward the guest missionaries at the court, sometimes on the verge of mockery, and on the other hand, the great visibility they bestowed on Christian iconography in artistic spaces of utter symbolic importance such as the palace and the imperial portrait in books and albums, explains the variety and often inconsistency of the interpretations about the Muslim-Christian relationship at the Mughal court. This topic is investigated in the last chapter of this book.

#### FACTS VERSUS METAPHORS

And yet, in facing this state of affairs the specialists of Mughal painting again tend to cling to the texts' words. Exemplary in this regard, is Koch's analysis of an excerpt from the *Jahangirnama* (*Book of Jahangir*). To express the magnitude of his authority and kingly status the emperor wrote, "As in the time of my reign wild beasts have abandoned their savagery."<sup>98</sup> The sentence employs the well-known trope of the supranatural power of domesticating wild animals rooted in the mythology of paradigmatic figures like Plato, Orpheus, Alexander the Great, or King Solomon, popular in Islamic and Persianate literature. This trope also appears in painting, for example under the form of the symbolic thematic of a peaceful assembly or pair of animals (*dad-o dam*), either visualized in the iconography or alluded to in inscriptions within the picture. In one famous allegorical picture representing Jahangir surrounded by symbols such as the chain of scales of justice, a discrete inscription says, "Through the justice of Shah Nur ud-Din Jahangir. The lion has sipped milk from the teat of the goat"<sup>99</sup> (Fig. 3). Koch has studied and proposed a decipherment of this complex iconography in Jahangiri painting.<sup>100</sup>

Based on this collection of objective data, this scholar made this curious interpretation of Jahangir's appropriation of this animal symbolism: "Jahangir



3 *Emperor Jahangir Triumphant Over Poverty*, attributed to Abu'l-Hassan, c. 1620.  
Mughal India. Opaque watercolor, gold, and ink on paper.  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

goes as far as to present this symbol as a historical fact."<sup>101</sup> No one has taken issue with the remark, yet one may question such a literal and slightly "Orientalistic" (in the Saidian sense) view of Jahangir's persona, who, for the purpose of self-representation, obviously played with highly rhetorical devices. The comment simply presents the emperor like an irrational ruler coming straight out of the *Thousand and One Nights'* tales. It is anyhow with limited success that art historians have thoroughly explored the period texts in order to find tangible traces of Mughal theories and doctrines on Mughal painting. To quote another instance of the frequent unfruitfulness of this type of investigation and reading of the texts, Ebba Koch had to concede that in the writings of Shah Jahan's son, she did not find any significant écho to the popular pictorial theme of the hunt: "Although he was a prolific writer, Dara-Shikoh's works fail to provide something more than the occasional and rather general use of the hunt as a metaphor in his mystical poetry."<sup>102</sup>

Another important issue these primary sources raise regards the validity of statements from historical reports that seem to provide plain and unambiguous information on the reality they describe. For they, too, convey *habitus* patterns or intellectual reflexes to be distinguished from enunciations genuinely reflecting the period's actual artistic life. The famous declaration of Abu'l-Fazl (Akbar's prominent court writer) deeming "pictures as much inferior to the written letter" epitomizes this tricky feature of the Mughal historical literature.<sup>103</sup> The scholars did not miss the opportunity to quote this *petite phrase* as evidence for a certain conception of Mughal artistic culture in which visuality would be considered secondary. The usual reading interprets the minister's message as a warning against the illusory impression of the utmost significance of visual forms that the blossoming of images in Mughal courtly culture might produce. But this is a simplistic view of things that are in reality more complex.

Abu'l-Fazl's pronouncement signifies more than its literal wording, it has a second level of meaning. Similarly to Persianate texts, this type of statement does not match the ocularcentric character of Mughal culture. More than in any other Persianate polity, the rhetorical power of naturalistic forms and visuality was optimized in the Mughal Empire, with images representing mimetic bodies and recognizable faces appearing everywhere in the cultural landscape, both on walls and objects. The list of historical data suggesting that visuality competed with the world of letters is long: reports about the Mughal emperors' love for paintings and the commissioning of special pictures for special events; the development of a genre of portrait with the figure holding images in homage to the sovereign, the display of large paintings in social rituals, the increase of figurative decoration in architectural design, and so on. For example, once Jahangir claimed in a sentence invariably cited in the historiography, "As regards myself, my liking for painting and my practice in

judging it have arrived at such a point 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."<sup>104</sup>

Abu'l-Fazl's phrase must be understood as, not about the Mughal attitude toward the visual arts and visuality, but rather as an old adage or a principle that one would recall and repeat in reference to an inherited stock of traditional wisdom and religious-philosophical habits never forgotten or intellectually challenged because they are perceived as sacred values. Yet, these values form only one level in the multilayered Mughal aesthetic consciousness and subconsciousness in which legacies and *habitus* pile up, coexisting with new inputs often deconstructing or challenging them. Beyond the intellectual memory revealed in these pronouncement-reminders reside the more active and flexible levels of thought shaped afresh by contingent factors, circumstance, and factuality. It is the expression of those more porous loci of consciousness in the literature that we need to take into account, as they may better highlight a Mughal artistic vision that was far more complex than it appears in primary written sources.

#### MUGHAL GRADING OF PAINTING AND CALLIGRAPHY

The same reading beyond semantic appearances applies to another textual material that could, but should not, be considered unquestionable and plain evidence of the lesser importance of painting in the Mughal conception of the arts—namely, the inspections notes and grading numbers written inside books in the imperial library. According to John Seyller, who has carefully analyzed these data, the evidence gives the “greatest weight to calligraphy, as is clear from the low ranking of some profusely illustrated books and the high ones of other unillustrated books written by certain esteemed calligraphers.”<sup>105</sup> Indeed, the first-class ranking (the Mughal grading system had five levels of quality) may have been attributed more often to calligraphy than to painting, but that does not necessarily indicate an immutable inferiority of the latter. Many other factors may have caused this state of affairs.

First of all, there is the probability that the librarians, who contributed to the evaluation process, may have been better equipped and trained to appreciate calligraphy than painting. Calligraphic expression has been regulated by precise rules of practice since the beginning of Islam whereas the art of illustration did not receive the support of equivalent pragmatics, thus rendering the evaluation process more subjective and less rational. It is then possible that the desire of applying high standards of quality to painting without this support has engendered a certain level of severity in the notation. Yet, as Seyller underscores by quoting a comment by Jahangir on a particular work, paintings could be rated at the same level of excellence as calligraphy.

Thus perhaps a harsher judgment was applied to painting while there were higher expectations for this art traditionally and historically considered inferior to calligraphy, and not as regulated by established criteria. But when those expectations were fulfilled, pictorial masterpieces could be as much appreciated and praised as calligraphic works. Furthermore, as a traditional practice following precise century-old conventions, calligraphy was less at risk of failure or mediocrity than painting, which developed later in a much more empirical manner, and which therefore was more prone to arbitrary judgment. Undoubtedly, the differing histories of the two practices play a part in the more variable success rate of illustrations as compared with the steadier achievement of calligraphy reflected in these notations.

Finally, in the literature of the period, two distinct expressions of the Mughal vision of pictorial art coexisted: the unquestionable Islamic-Persianate *habitus*, and the more spontaneous and directly and authentically informative reference to the Mughal Empire's actual artistic life. Often not in tune with one another, these expressions of the complex Mughal psyche do generate an apparently unsolvable contradiction, but a contradiction to be interpreted in positive terms—that is, as the result of a dynamic culture maintaining with the utmost care its past and inheritances without fossilizing in them. Overall these texts constitute precious tools for the understanding of Mughal art making; nevertheless, they do not compensate for the absence of an aesthetic theory of some kind. Therefore the critical study of Mughal painting, and a fortiori of its hybridism, essentially rests upon methods of art hermeneutic.

## Notes

- 1 What one usually understands as “Mughal painting” consists mainly of book and album illustrations. But there existed monumental Mughal images painted on textiles, free from any medium, and hung on walls or tent parts, as well as wall paintings. In terms of aesthetic conceptualization, however, most of these products constituted enlarged miniature images rather than large-scale paintings per se. Usually the painters were trained miniaturists who would apply their methods to a monumental medium. Therefore, the term “miniature” is used to designate Mughal painting in general. These large paintings are appropriately called “monumental miniatures.”
- 2 See an analogous distinction made by Gregg M. Horowitz, “Aesthetic Knowing and Historical Knowing,” in *Art History versus Aesthetics*, ed. James Elkins (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 211. For the main debates on art history, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005); *Fifty Key Texts in Art History*, ed. Diana Newall and Grant Pooke (London; New York: Routledge, 2012); *The Art of Art History, A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and Its Institutions*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).

- 3 The concepts of “art” and “aesthetics” have always been the subject of philosophical reflection and definition. Among the plethora of publications, see Stephen Zepke, *Art as Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guattari* (London; New York: Routledge, 2011); *Art History Versus Aesthetics*, ed. James Elkins (London; New York: Routledge, 2006); *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, ed. Zoya Kocur and Simon Leung (Malden, MA; Oxford, UK; Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis; Cambridge: Hackett, 1981); *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996); Gillian Rose and Tolia-Kelly Divya, *Visuality/Materiality, Identity, Critique and Ethics* (Farnham, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2012); and Barry Sandywell, *Dictionary of Visual Discourse*.
- 4 For a critical and concise overview of Gilles Deleuze’s ideas on art and their usefulness in art history, see Damian Sutton and David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze Reframed: Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008).
- 5 Patrick Doorly notably sets out to redefine the ontology of art based on a reflection upon the variegated aesthetic properties the concept conveys in *The Truth about Art, Reclaiming Quality* (Abingdon, UK: Zero Books, 2013).
- 6 Jean Fisher, “The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism,” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 234, and quoted by the editors in “Introduction to Part III,” 216. See also *The Pictorial Turn*, ed. Neal Curtis (London; New York: Routledge, 2011). On “visuality” see David Joselit’s definition, “the term *visuality* is a critical category which points to articulations of visual forms with extra-aesthetic determinants such as visual institutions and psychic formations. Visuality consequently encompasses two distinct registers which thoroughly imbricate in one another: the spectator and the spectacle, patterns of looking as well as habits of form.” In David Joselit, “Notes on Surfaces: Toward a Genealogy of Flatness,” in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, 296.
- 7 Alongside *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1970), see these other works by Michel Foucault: *L’Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969); *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); and *Naissance de la clinique: une archéologie du regard médical* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963).
- 8 These are a few designations among the variegated terminology used in the “new” interdisciplinary art history, as distinct from traditional art history. “Applied aesthetics” designates the application or use of aesthetic theory for the study of artworks, whereas pure “aesthetics” is a branch of philosophy. This nuance is analogous to the difference in science between “theoretical physics” and “applied physics,” “pure mathematics” and “applied mathematics,” and “geometry” and “applied geometry.”
- 9 Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology* (Dordrecht; Boston; London: Kluwer Academic, 1990), 10–11. It is crucial to distinguish and separate these phenomenological operations from the psychological operations that are

also engaged in the aesthetic experience. These are two levels of occurrence corresponding to two separate vantage points of analysis. It also should be noted that some thinkers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein were initially reluctant to recognize this distinction; likewise, the phenomenological view and method as applied to the academic study of art is not unanimously approved today either.

- 10 Maurice Merleau-Ponty is quoted in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen A. Johnson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 35. For insights in ontology and metaphysics in painting, see Galen A. Johnson, "Ontology and Painting: 'Eye and Mind,'" in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, 35–55.
- 11 The concept of "Specific Objects" that Donald Judd invented to describe his sculptures epitomizes this type of creative process aiming at fusing form and content in one single aesthetic entity, with the aim of giving all signifying power to form. The artist thus delivers through his work a one-track aesthetic metaphysics of "pure objecthood," one could say. See Donald Judd, *Complete Writings, 1959–1975* (Halifax: Press of Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2005).
- 12 On this epistemological objection, see Finbarr B. Flood's approach in his study of medieval Indian material culture, particularly his position on David Summers' "critique of the inadequacy of linguistic models to account for material things." In Flood's *Objects of Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 11, and the whole paragraph "Things and Texts," 9–14.
- 13 Despite the lingering controversy, it must be noted that hermeneutic is no longer de facto narrowly applied to texts. The vocabulary and conceptual frame of literary and linguistic criticism have been used for writing on art since the 1960s. On textual hermeneutic see, among other classic works, Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), in particular the paragraph "Writing and Iconicity," 40–43, and chapter 4, "Explanation and Understanding." For the problematic on textual versus visual hermeneutic, see W.T.J. Mitchell, "Word and Image," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 51–61.
- 14 In his controversial cosmic vision, radically innovative in its time, the scientist and Jesuit theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin integrates the rational notions of time, space, evolution, and history. See *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall, with an introduction by Sir Julian Huxley (New York: Harper & Row, 1959).
- 15 Introduction to *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, 1–2. See "Methodological and Ideological Perspectives," in *Crossing Cultures: Conflict, Migration and Convergence: The Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress of the History of Art*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2009), 76–91. See also in this same volume, John Onians, "Neuroarthistory as World Art History: Why Do Humans Make Art and Why Do They Make It Differently in Different Times and Places?" 76–8.
- 16 Introduction to *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, 2.
- 17 One can consider this scholar a trendsetter in this respect. See James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996); and *What Painting Is: How to Think about Oil Painting Using the Language of Alchemy* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998).

- 18 About the relationship of art and the philosophy of phenomenology see *Art and Phenomenology*, ed. Joseph Pary (London; New York: Routledge, 2010); Paul Crowther, *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts (Even the Frame)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). The method of phenomenology as applied to the field of Islamic art studies has been introduced with the following publications: Valerie Gonzalez, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001); "The Comares Hall in the Alhambra and James Turrell's Space That Sees: A Comparison of Aesthetic Phenomenology," in *Muqarnas: An Annual on the Visual Culture of the Islamic World*, vol. 20 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003), 253–78; "The Double Ontology of Islamic Calligraphy: A Word-Image on a Folio from the Museum of Raqqada (Tunisia)," in *M. Uğur Derman, 65th Birthday Festschrift*, ed. Irvin Cemil Schick (Istanbul: Sabancı Üniversitesi, 2001), 313–40; and *Le Piège de Salomon, La Pensée de l'Art dans le Coran* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002).
- 19 Semiotics was convincingly applied by Jose Miguel Puerta Vilchez in *Los Codigos de Utopia de la Alhambra de Granada* (Granada, Spain: Biblioteca de Ensayo, 1990), and by Gülru Necipoğlu in *The Topkapi Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture* (Santa Monica: Getty Center Publications Programs, 1995). Puerta Vilchez is a pioneer in resorting to an advanced interdisciplinary methodology. Among the rare scholars who possess a solid theoretical background, he is also the author of the unequalled study of medieval Islamic philosophy with aesthetic content (in Spanish only), *Historia del pensamiento estético árabe, Al-Andalus y la estética árabe clásica* (Madrid: Ediciones Akal, 1997).
- 20 On semiotics and semantics, see *Paris School Semiotics: Theory*, ed. Paul Perron and Frank Collins (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1989).
- 21 In the study of Islamic material culture, Finbarr B. Flood's *Objects of Translation* expansively uses theories of cultural studies. See Valerie Gonzalez, review of *Objects of Translation, Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter*, by Finbarr B. Flood, *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* (REMMM) (Aix-en-Provence, October 25, 2010), <http://remmm.revues.org/index2926.html>. Concerning late Ottoman art, see Wendy M.K. Shaw, *Ottoman Painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), and Nebahat Avcioglu, *Turquie and the Politics of Representation, 1728–1876* (Farnham, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011).
- 22 Oleg Grabar and, after him, David J. Roxburgh have inaugurated this approach with interesting views and questions. Yet, these valuable attempts are methodologically inadequate and therefore can only be considered a first, small step. See Oleg Grabar, "Toward an Aesthetic of Persian Painting," in *The Art of Interpreting: Papers in Art History*, ed. S.C. Scott (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 129–39, and "What Should One Know about Islamic Art?," in *Res Islamic Arts* 43 (Spring 2003): 5–11. See in the same issue, David J. Roxburgh's unsteady comparison of Persianate painting with comic books, "Micrographia: Toward a Visual Logic of Persianate Painting," in *Res Islamic Arts* 43 (Spring 2003): 12–30.
- 23 See, for example, John Seyller, "Overpainting in the Cleveland Tuti nama," *Artibus Asiae*, Museum Rietberg Zurich/Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Tome LII (1992): 283–318; Laura Parodi, Jennifer H. Porter, Frank D. Preusser, Yosi Pozeilov, "Tracing the History of a Mughal Album Page in

- the Los Angeles County Museum of Art," March 8, 2010, [www.asianart.com/articles.html](http://www.asianart.com/articles.html); and Gregory Minissale, "Piecing Together the Emperor Akbar's Lost *Sharafname*," *Oriental Art* XLIV, 3 (1998): 67–71.
- 24 Ostracizing the practitioner of aesthetics in Islamic art is to be denounced. Out of a clear necessity to modernize this field of study the organizers of academic events have been using the trick of inviting scholars equipped with knowledge in aesthetic-critical studies from outside the circle of the historians of Islamic art. In this way, unidisciplinarity is maintained from within while appearing interdisciplinary from without.
- 25 See "Jean-Francois Lyotard (B. 1924) 'What Is Postmodernism?,'" in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 1008–14. See also Grahams Jones, *Lyotard Reframed: Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014).
- 26 See David J. Roxburgh, review of *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*, by Valerie Gonzalez, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 66 (October 4, 2007): 317, [www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/524173](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/524173).
- 27 See Cynthia Robinson, review of *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*, by Valerie Gonzalez, *Ars Orientalis* 32 (2002): 266. In other respects, in the historiographical article by Lara Eggleton, "History in the Making: The Ornament of the Alhambra and the Past-Facing Present," in *Islamic Art Historiography*, the author omits to mention the existing critical work on the building. Yet she claims to open "New Perspectives on the 'Old Pile': 1960s to the Present," 25, and asserts the necessity of "bringing the Alhambra into the present," 29.
- 28 For example, an inscription dating to the fourteenth-century construction of the Alhambra invited me to explore its Quranic source: Qur'an 27: 44, *Surat al-Naml* (chapter "The Ants"). This verse conveys an aesthetic thought analyzed in Valerie Gonzalez, *Le Piège de Salomon*, and in "The Aesthetics of the Solomonic Parable in the Qur'an," *Beauty and Islam*, 26–41.
- 29 Such complaints and comments often come up in conversations and in book reviews.
- 30 James Elkins, introduction to *The Object Stares Back*, iv.
- 31 To undermine the critical analysis of aesthetic concepts apprehended as Islamic in nature, some experts take issue with wordings such as "Islamic artistic creation," which supposedly promotes an essentializing (reductionist) conception of the arts in Islam. Yet this wording is widely used. To quote just an example, locutions of the same vein—"Islamic art" and "Islamic culture"—appear in *The Persian Album, 1400–1600: From Dispersal to Collection* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), 4, 303.
- 32 Edmund Husserl, "II Transcendental Aesthetics," in *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writing in Transcendental Phenomenology*, ed. Don Welton (Bloomington; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 174.
- 33 Aesthetic and artistic ontology is grossly missing in Islamic art scholarship. This lacuna is the source of many misinterpretations and shortcomings, as will be pointed out.

- 34 See again Stephen Zepke, *Art as Abstract Machine*.
- 35 Paul Klee quoted by Constance Naubert-Reiser, *La Création Chez Paul Klee, Etude de la Relation Théorie-Praxis de 1900 à 1924* (Paris: Klincksieck Editions, 1978), 77. The English translation of the quotation in French is my own: "La création vit en tant que genèse sous la visible surface de l'oeuvre." Indeed, a form may lead to another by virtue of a self-generative dynamic resting upon a capacity of intrinsic incitation to creation and the potentialities it inherently possesses. It is in this sense that a form possesses an inner life. Of course, context informs this creative mechanism and makes this inner life of the form thrive. Artists' writings are the best literature to consult for insights into art ontology. Alongside Paul Klee's writing, I would mention Wassily Kandinsky's famous texts *On the Spiritual in Art* (1912) and *Point and Line to Plane* (1926).
- 36 The process of the internal and non-intentional production of meaning that may occur in art is illustrated in this case study of a Jahangiri allegory: Valerie Gonzalez, "Confronting Images: Jahangir Versus King James I," in *Islam and the Politics of Culture in Europe, Memory, Aesthetics, Art*, ed. Frank Peter, Sarah Dornhorf, and Elena Arigita, Global-Local Islam (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2013), 219–35.
- 37 Edmund Husserl, "II. Transcendental Aesthetics," 117.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 174.
- 39 "La substantifique moelle" is a metaphorical expression invented by the French writer François Rabelais to eloquently designate the concept of essence in his masterpiece *Gargantua*: "A l'exemple d'icelluy vous convient estre saiges, pour fleurir, sentir et estimer ces beaulx livres de haulte gresse, legiers au prochat et hardiz à la rencontre; puis, par curieuse leçon et meditation frequente, rompre l'os et sucer la sustantifique mouelle." 1534, "Prologue."
- 40 See Maria Walsh, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013).
- 41 Bissera Pentcheva, "Aural Architecture: Phenomenology and Multi-Sensory Aesthetics in Hagia Sophia" *GESTA* 50, 2 (2011): 93–111. A particularly interesting aspect of Pentcheva's work is her study of the building's acoustics. This aspect of Hagia Sophia immediately reminded me of the Wagnerian concept of total art; therefore, during our collaboration, I suggested that Pencheva explore and research this idea. In her article's note 6, this idea is noted but the source is not mentioned. Our conversations, my rewriting of the theoretical parts of the text, and the bibliography on aesthetic phenomenology that I provided also are not properly acknowledged.
- 42 See Bissera Pentcheva, "Aural Architecture," 93. It must be noted again that this reference is directly borrowed from Valerie Gonzalez, "The Comares Hall in the Alhambra and James Turrell's Space That Sees," 256. This is not properly acknowledged in Pentcheva's text and only vaguely mentioned in endnote 3, which is related to the excerpt in question. The number of the page bearing my description of Turrell's work is missing while my article is made quasi-invisible as it appears at the end of a list of general publications on James Turrell that do not analyze this particular construction in Jerusalem.
- 43 Valerie Gonzalez, "The Comares Hall in the Alhambra and James Turrell's Space That Sees," 256.

- 44 Bissera Pentcheva, "Aural Architecture," 93. This excerpt was inserted after I contributed to Pentcheva's essay; therefore, I was not able to observe and correct this mistake.
- 45 *Islamic Art Historiography: Journal of Art Historiography*, guest edited by Moya Carey and Margaret S. Graves, June 6, 2012, <http://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/number-6-june-2012-2/>.
- 46 Wendy M.K. Shaw, "The Islam in Islamic Art History: Secularism and Public Discourse," *Islamic Art Historiography*, 54.
- 47 This essay was first published in *Islamic Art and the Museum*, ed. Benoît Junod et al. (London: Saqi Books, 2012). The expression "modern construction" comes from the author's short biography in *Islamic Art Historiography*: "her critical interests encompass many subjects, including methodological and historiographical issues in modern constructions of the field of Islamic art." <http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/necipogludoc.pdf>, <http://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/number-6-june-2012-2/>.
- 48 It should also be pointed out that in surveying the different practices of Islamic art history, Necipoğlu mentions only en passant the existence of an aesthetic-critical current and omits to provide bibliographical references.
- 49 Gülru Necipoğlu, "The Concept of Islamic Art," 1.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 The period from 2001 onward is not that "recent," and the publications that applied the phenomenological method on Islamic art have since had a certain resonance.
- 52 Gülru Necipoğlu, "The Concept of Islamic Art," 8.
- 53 Ibid., 25. The sociology and anthropology of art are by no means new approaches, although like any other methods they have evolved on the basis of different visions and require constant re-actualization. Islamic art was discovered and investigated as an object of archaeology, collection, and display in museums; therefore, since the beginning of the discipline's activity, it naturally mobilized techniques specifically designed to enlighten the cultures and contexts of its production, alongside the descriptive, classifying, and cataloging processes.
- 54 Gülru Necipoğlu, "The Concept of Islamic Art," 26.
- 55 This is of course by no means to diminish the importance of context and history for understanding processes of artistic genesis and becoming. The point is to expose the shortcomings stemming from the misunderstanding of the nature of art and aesthetics.
- 56 On culturocentrism, see David Y.F. Ho, "Internalized Culture, Culturocentrism, and Transcendence," *The Counseling Psychologist* 23, 1 (1995): 4–24, <http://tcp.sagepub.com/content/23/1/4.short>. The abstract thus defines the concept: "Internalized culture is introduced as a psychological, rather than anthropological, construct most useful to counselors. It addresses explicitly both between-group and within-group variations resulting from individual differences in enculturation and helps to sensitize counselors against

stereotyping. The problem of defining cultural boundaries arises, with serious difficulties in defining three specific classes of cultural phenomena. It is argued that there is a basic continuity from intracultural to intercultural understanding. In a sense, all interpersonal encounters are cross-cultural in nature. Accordingly, all counseling requires an awareness of cultural processes and the transcendence of one's internalized culture."

- 57 Throughout her article, Wendy Shaw exposes this discourse on Islamic art in giving credit to the rare scholars that have explored this rich aspect of it. I will add to her bibliographical references a recent publication she did not have a chance to mention, Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies, Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). In it Bashir discusses the role of painting in mystical practices.
- 58 Wendy M.K. Shaw, "The Islam in Islamic Art History," 29.
- 59 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. G. Bennington and I. McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), and *Of Grammatology*, corrected edition, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). For an analysis of Derrida and other thinkers' views on painting and aesthetics, see chapter 6 "Deconstruction and the Limits of Interpretation," in *The Art of Art History*, 271–315. See also K. Malcom Richards, *Derrida Reframed: Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008).
- 60 Quoted from *Of Grammatology*, in "Critical Revisions," in *Art in Theory*, 918.
- 61 Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, 158–9.
- 62 See Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction Engaged: The Sydney Seminars*, ed. Terry Smith and Paul Patton (Sydney: Power Publications, 2001).
- 63 Persian aesthetic literature is well studied. See Priscilla Soucek, "Nizami on Painters and Paintings," in *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, ed. Richard Ettinghausen (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972), 9–21, and "The Theory and Practice of Portraiture in the Persian Tradition," *Muqarnas* 17 (2000): 97–108; Yves Porter, "La forme et le sens, A propos du portrait dans la littérature persane classique," in *Pand-o Sokhan, Mélanges offerts à Charles-Henri de Fouchécour* (Téhéran: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1995), 219–31, "From the 'Theory of the Two Qalams' to the 'Seven Principles of Painting': Theory, Terminology, and Practice in Persian Classical Painting," *Muqarnas* 17 (2000): 109–18, and *Peinture et art du livre: essai sur la littérature technique indo-persane* (Paris: Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1992); Johann Christoph Burgel, *The Feather of the Simurgh: The Licit Magic of the Arts in Medieval Islam* (New York; London: New York University Press, 1988), 119–37; David J. Roxburgh, "Kamal al-Din Bihzad and Authorship in Persianate Painting," *Muqarnas* 17 (2000): 119–46, *Prefacing the Image: The Writing of Art History in Sixteenth Century Iran, Muqarnas Supplements* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), and his study of Dust Muhammad's preface in "Bahram Mirza's 1544–45 Album," in *The Persian Album 1400–1600*, 245–307.
- 64 See in particular Priscilla Soucek, "Nizami on Painters and Paintings," and "The Theory and Practice of Portraiture in the Persian Tradition."

- 65 Martin Jay's fascinating and unequaled exploration of French visual culture is exemplary of the study of the philosophical and textual foundations on which visuality is constructed in a given context. See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1994).
- 66 For Al-Ghazali and other Muslim thinkers from the East, see Jose Miguel Puerta Vilchez, "La mimesis como definicion del arte en la falsafa oriental" and "La estética de al-Gazali," in *Historia del pensamiento estético árabe*, 276–314 and 720–37, and for the Plotinan legacy see "Principios estéticos en la version árabe de las Eneadas de Plotino," 562–70. See also my own study of al-Ghazali and other Islamic philosophers in "Beauty and the Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Thought," in *Beauty and Islam*, 5–25.
- 67 On this topic of the relationship between classical philosophy and art in Islam, see Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Topkapi Scroll*.
- 68 The medieval Arabic-Islamic tradition conceptualizes spoken language, the word, writing, and calligraphy as superior expressions. Islamic culture is founded upon the revelation of God's speech; therefore, it has initially privileged the sense of hearing over the sense of sight, and verbalization over visualization. It is therefore a logocentric culture.
- 69 The term "ocularcentric" is used by Martin Jay to signify the centrality of the sense of sight and vision in some cultures at particular periods, *Downcast Eyes*, 3.
- 70 See, for example, this painting probably made to commemorate Akbar's circumcision, studied by Laura E. Parodi and Bruce Wannell in "The Earliest Datable Mughal Painting, *An Allegory of the Celebrations for Akbar's Circumcision at the Sacred Spring of Khwaja Seh Yaran near Kabul (1546 AD)* [Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preussischer Kulturbesitz, *Libr. Pict. A117, fol. 15a*]," November 18, 2011, [www.asianart.com/articles.html](http://www.asianart.com/articles.html). This excellent study exposes these changes of function of the art of painting in the Persianate context.
- 71 Gregory Minissale appropriately evokes the concept of *habitus* set forward by Pierre Bourdieu to explain some aesthetic customs and traditions in Persianate culture, see "Mughal Painting and the *Habitus*," in *Images of Thought*, 153–56.
- 72 David J. Roxburgh, *The Persian Album, 1400–1600*, 192. He also notices, "Dust Muhammad's reference to decorating (*tazyin*) the album is as oblique as his statement about ordering and arranging it." In *The Persian Album, 1400–1600*, 269.
- 73 This is my own translation of Yves Porter in, "La forme et le sens," 221: "Dès lors, il est clair que dans cette aire culturelle, le portrait, et les arts figuratifs en général, sont le fruit d'un compromis."
- 74 In Oleg Grabar's clear terms "a cursory look at Ottoman, Mughal, or other Indian miniatures and paintings reveals a host of features which identify a different visual language from the Persian one, even if a family resemblance is generally obvious." In "Toward an Aesthetic Interpretation of Persian Painting," 131.
- 75 Gregory Minissale, *Images of Thought*, note 100, 250. Like many other observers, this author relies heavily on the Islamic-Persian philosophy and mythology about art, and this has led him to make this statement.

- 76 In his study of the aesthetic of Persian painting, Oleg Grabar expresses the pessimistic thought that the questions left unanswered after having exhausted the elucidatory possibilities of texts will be unanswered forever, "I do not have an explanation for each one of these specific and for most part unique details. Hardly any of them is explained directly by the text, but I can imagine the kind of research into visual vocabulary, text criticism, and contemporary history which may elucidate many of them, while the rest will enter into the limbo of answers whose questions are lost for ever." In "Toward an Aesthetic of Persian Painting," 138.
- 77 See Priscilla Soucek, "Nizami on Painters and Paintings," and "The Theory and Practice of Portraiture in the Persian Tradition," 98.
- 78 Priscilla Soucek, "The Theory and Practice of Portraiture in the Persian Tradition," 98.
- 79 The most illuminating study concerns Mughal art, see Monica Juneja, "Translating the Body into Image: The Body Politic and Visual Practice at the Mughal Court during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Images of the Body in India: South Asian and European Perspectives on Rituals and Performativity*, ed. Axel Michaels and Christoph Wulf (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 235–60. On the Jahangiri allegorical portraits, see also Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology* (New Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 5–8, and "The Mughal Emperor as Solomon, Majnun, and Orpheus, or, The Album as a Think Tank for Allegory," *Muqarnas* 27 (2011): 277–312. On Persian painting, see Kishwar Rizvi, "The Suggestive Portrait of Shah 'Abbas: Prayer and Likeness in a Safavid *Shahnama*," *Art Bulletin* 94, 2 (June 2012): 226–50. On Ottoman painting, see Zeren Tanindi, "Transformation of Words into Images: Portraits of Ottoman Courtiers in the Diwans of Baki and Nadiri," *Res* 43 (Spring 2003): 131–45, and *The Sultan's Portrait: Picturing the House of Osman*, ed. Selmin Kangal (Istanbul: Isbank 2000).
- 80 Kishwar Rizvi, "The Suggestive Portrait of Shah 'Abbas," *Art Bulletin* 94, 2 (June 2012): 226–50.
- 81 *Ibid.*, 244. This is a well-known fact. Jahangir wanted a portrait of Shah 'Abbas and sent one of his portraitists to the Safavid court to make one. The Safavid monarch complied with the request. A quasi-full-face drawing and painted portraits of him have survived.
- 82 *Ibid.*, 243.
- 83 *Ibid.*
- 84 Rizvi writes, "and it appears that there are no recognizable likenesses of the first four Safavid rulers. One of the reasons for this hesitation may have to do with their status as semidivine figures, as the shahs were believed to be descendants of the Prophet Muhammad," 243.
- 85 See the analysis of the codified "signaletic portrait" genre in Chapters 3 and 5.
- 86 Kishwar Rizvi, "The Suggestive Portrait of Shah 'Abbas," 243.
- 87 On the theme of kingship, see this book that examines the Persian thought and expression of power, *Every Inch a King: Comparative Studies on Kings and Kingship in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, ed. Lynette Mitchell and Charles Melville (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

- 88 For this designation I took inspiration from the terminology physicist Stephen Hawking uses in his theory of black holes: the “event horizon” and “apparent horizon.” This dual quality apparent/event applied perfectly to our duality here of the invisible “event portrait” versus the visible “apparent portrait” in the pictorial matter. An “event horizon” has been defined as an “invisible cloak covering a black hole that allows nothing—not even light—to escape,” while the “apparent horizon temporarily holds matter hostage and mangles it before releasing it.” These quotations are from a report on Hawking’s most recently released paper in *Nature* (an international weekly journal of science), in which he explains his new idea that “there are no black holes.” In “Stephen Hawking: Notion of ‘Event Horizon’ Is Incompatible with Quantum Theory,” *Technology News*, January 26, 2014, <http://abclocal.go.com/ktrk/story?section=news/technology&id=9407566> and <http://www.nature.com/news/stephen-hawking-there-are-no-black-holes-1.14583>.
- 89 Salman Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), 119. This book mixes history and fiction. It relies in particular on historic details and accounts of the Mughal courtly context in Akbar’s times.
- 90 Quoted by Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, 1.
- 91 Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, 2.
- 92 See Muzzafar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World, Studies on Culture and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); *Indo-Muslim Cultures in Transition*, ed. Alka Patel and Karen Leonard (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Annemarie Schimmel, *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture*, trans. C. Attwood (London: Reaktion Press, 2004).
- 93 See Susan Stronge, *Painting for the Mughal Emperor: The Art of the Book, 1560–1660* (London: Victoria and Albert Museum Publications, 2002), 30–31.
- 94 This treatise is hardly indicative of the nature of painting and the pictorial practice itself. See the study of this treatise by Isabella Nardi, *The Theory of Citrasutras in Indian Painting*.
- 95 The main accounts and memoirs include the *Baburnama*, the *Humayun Nama*, *A’in-I Akbari*, the *Akbarnama*, the *Jahangirnama*, and the *Padshahnama* and *Shah Jahan-nama*, written respectively by Babur himself (r. 1526–30), by the sister of Humayun (r. 1530–40 and 1555–56), Gulbadan Begum (c. 1523–1603), upon Akbar’s request, by the minister Abu’l-Fazl for Akbar (r. 1556–1605), by Jahangir himself (r. 1605–27) and by ‘Abd al-Hamid Lahori and Muhammad Salah Kamboh Lahori for Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58).
- 96 Here is a list of publications on these texts: *Allami Abu’l-Fazl, A’in-I Akbari*, Persian text ed. Henry Blochmann, 2 vols (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society, 1873–77), rev. ed. D.C. Phillot, 3 vols in 2 (Delhi: 1989). *Akbarnama*, trans. by Henry Beveridge in 3 vols, 1902–39, reprint (Delhi: Ess Publications, 1979). *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur: Prince and Emperor*, trans. and ed. Wheeler M. Thackston (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). *Tuzuk-I Jahangiri (or Jahangirnama)*, ed. in Persian by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Alighar, 1864, and trans. by Alexander Rogers and ed. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols., 1909–14, reprint (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1968) and ed., trans., and ann. by Wheeler M. Thackston under the title *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of*

- Jahangir, Emperor of India* (Washington, DC: Arthur Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1999); Dara Shikoh, *Diwan-I Dara Shikoh*, ed. Ahmad Nabi Khan (Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan, University of Punjab, 1969).
- 97 On this subject the most important publications are by Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World*, and by these same authors, "Frank Disputations: Catholics and Muslims in the Court of Jahangir (1608–11)," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 46, 4 (2009): 457–511, <http://ier.sagepub.com/content/46/4/457>.
- 98 Quoted from *Tuzuk-I Jahangiri* by Ebba Koch in *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, note 15, 5.
- 99 Quoted by Robert Skelton, "Imperial Symbolism in Mughal Painting," in *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 182.
- 100 Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, and "The Mughal Emperor as Solomon, Majnun, and Orpheus, or, The Album as a Think Tank for Allegory," 277–312.
- 101 Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, 126.
- 102 Ebba Koch, *Occasional Papers: Dara-Shikoh Shooting Nilgais: Hunt and Landscape in Mughal Painting*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1998), 27–8.
- 103 Ebba Koch quotes this statement, frequently mentioned in the studies, in *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, 2.
- 104 Another frequently quoted statement by Jahangir from the *Tizuk-i-Jahangiri; or Memoirs of Jahangir*, 21. Also quoted by John Seyller in "A Mughal Code of Connoisseurship," *Muqarnas* 17 (2000): 177.
- 105 John Seyller, "A Mughal Code of Connoisseurship," *Muqarnas* 17 (2000): 177.



## Historiographical and Conceptual Framework of Mughal Pictorial Hybridity

Objectivity, impartiality, and autonomy from political positions are important ideals in the academic profession, and I count myself among the more enthusiastic supporters of such values.

Prasenjit Duara, *Journal of Asian Studies*

The hermeneutic of Mughal painting, as a practice distinct from art archaeology, remains in its infancy. A few critical attempts have been made but they are marred by misconceptions. This situation imposes the tough but necessary job of assessing the main publications considered the most authoritative. As Mughal painting is affiliated with the category of Persianate art and knowledge of Persian pictorial models constitutes a condition sine qua non to investigate this material, this assessment cannot skip a glimpse at the aesthetic studies on Persian painting as well.<sup>1</sup> However, these studies are not only scarce, they are, again, problematic.<sup>2</sup> The most enlightening work on Persian pictorial art in historiography heretofore is *The Persian Album, 1400–1600: From Dispersal to Collection* by David J. Roxburgh. This book provides solid findings, allowing a discussion of questions central to a critical inquiry into any form or branch of Persianate book art.<sup>3</sup> But by attesting to the optimal efficiency of traditional art history, these findings also unveil the limitations of this monolithic self-contained methodology.

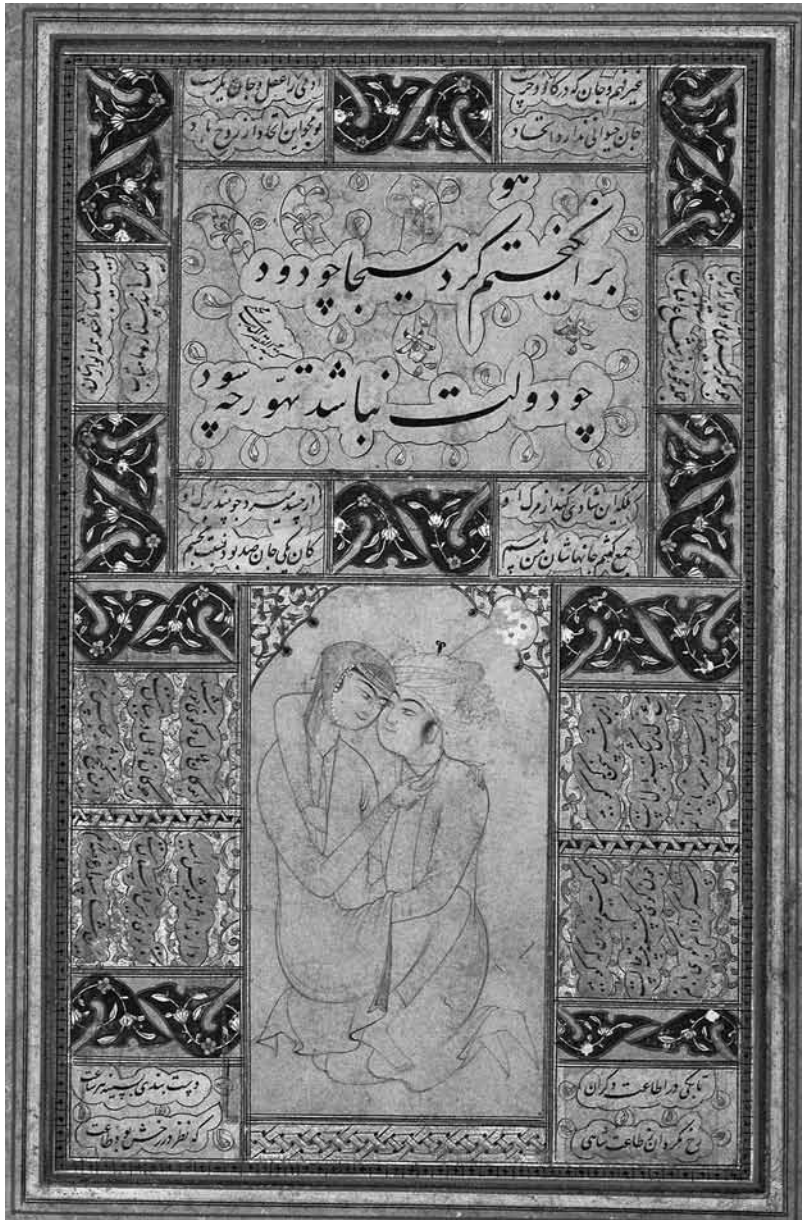
### ***The Persian Album, 1400–1600*, by David J. Roxburgh: The Excellence and Limitations of Traditional Art History**

In this book, David Roxburgh analyzes with great finesse the Persian tradition of making albums whose layered morphology comprises paintings, drawings, and calligraphies of different sources and periods assembled together to form a corpus. In correlating the message of the artifacts' preface with the

information gathered from the images' configuration, Roxburgh painstakingly unravels the logic underpinning the procedures of collecting and aggregating the heteroclit material in order to form the whole object. This logic, as he convincingly demonstrates, is fundamentally art historical. The album's project consists of constructing visualized histories of the art of depiction and calligraphy, and of telling the beholder these histories both *through* and *on* art. This preoccupation with history indeed pervades the prefaces filled with the classical Persian references to painting, painters, and myths about pictoriality, thus mirroring the "shape of history" given to the folios.<sup>4</sup>

In an unusual move against the "perversely common suspicion of objects among art historians" and for the first time after the pioneering attempts of Oleg Grabar in the 1990s, Roxburgh places the art itself under scrutiny.<sup>5</sup> The outcome of this enterprise is utterly elucidatory, but for this very reason it also brings up a concrete proof of the necessity of art hermeneutic in the investigation of painting in the Islamic world.<sup>6</sup> Above all, if Roxburgh's identification of the art historical conceptualization of the Persian album constitutes a considerable accomplishment, it does not bring our knowledge of this material to closure, particularly the knowledge of its aesthetic for which those results enlighten only one aspect, albeit a major one. Then, just a glance at the dense web of imaging configurations challenges the very idea of a univocal cognitivity of the objects and by inference of a unidirectional appreciation of them (Fig. 4). The sophistication of the montages, the diversity of intricate cut-and-paste strategies, the versatile frames, and so on, all these patterns and aggregated sets reach aesthetic and signifying levels well beyond those a didactic and pragmatic storytelling art could afford. A rationale, be it a historical rationale about art, or other principles of coherence that seem to have guided the artifacts' primal crafting cannot, however, explain in depth these aesthetic phenomena. Here are a few arguments supporting this observation.

The art historical metanarrative seems to lose its power in the albums' plastic details, which involve a high level of creative subjectivity, deconstructivist manipulation, and even intentional *aporia* (i.e. the blockage of meaning, introduction of doubtfulness, puzzling and questioning with no answers, etc.).<sup>7</sup> How to account for the imagery's gripping intricacy and other factors that defy logic, such as figures placed upside down, and their immediate, powerful visual phenomenality? The vagueness of the commentary about these complex features' purpose or meaning, such as "visual pleasure," "purely visual contemplation," "decorative effects," "virtuosity," or as Roxburgh put it, the "fundamentally physical way" in which one reacts to them, only disguises the perplexity they generate for the scholar.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is at this point that traditional art historical critique hits the limits of its elucidatory capacity and that an updated critical inquiry is no longer avoidable. The method of phenomenology is particularly suitable to better understand the fundamental processes by which these artistic complexities



4 *Young Lovers Embracing*, illustrated single work, sixteenth century. Qazvin, Iran. Opaque watercolor, ink, silver, and gold on paper. © 2000–2014 Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights reserved

operate perceptually and semantically—that is, the mode of appearing of the paintings, calligraphies and drawings’ arrangement in both the whole and the parts involving specific structures of beholding, perception, and intellection or cognition. Although this is a large task for a future research project, a short demonstration here will pave the way.

To achieve his goal of decoding the logic of the Persian album’s construction, Roxburgh privileged the holistic frame of viewing the objects under observation as “totalities” of collected items. This thoughtful approach has allowed the successful explication of the cultural practice of making albums. The focus on the albums’ preface in particular has strongly encouraged the author’s choice of epistemic perspective. Yet, by Roxburgh’s own admission, these prefaces tell more about the objects’ productivity than about their artistic nature.<sup>9</sup> And in fact, this perspective, rather more exclusive than inclusive, does not permit a full understanding of the objects’ artistic scope, therefore, it may pose problems. For in the absence of a systematic, close-up analysis of the Persian album’s individual items to supplement the examination of the whole, the art historical rationale this examination argues about might be wrongly thought of as the unique governing force in the artifact’s aesthetic system. According to this rationale, as put together the items represent historical artistic sequences about art making and collecting.

Positing this rationale at the very center of the Persian album art is misleading in the sense that it blurs the categorical distinction between the cultural determinants and the artistic practice itself, and between intentionality and realization and product. As the art theorist Monroe Beardsley explained, “Thus, when we are concerned with the object itself, we should distinguish between internal and external evidence of its nature; external evidence is evidence from the psychological and social background of the object, from which we may infer something about the object itself.” Interpretations mingling these two parameters of analysis, technically termed “intentionalistic criticism,” “can be regarded as misleading ways of talking about the artwork itself.”<sup>10</sup> Therefore, theoretically, there is “strong reason for not making intention the final court of appeal.”<sup>11</sup> Applied to the case of the Persian album, this principle underscores the necessity of properly evaluating and reading Roxburgh’s findings. The latter shine light on the conceptualization of the Persian album as an artistic medium following particular artistic conventions and cultural customs that form a compound of external and internal evidence. However, Roxburgh’s findings also leave nearly unaddressed an essential part of this art’s internal evidence that is the creative fashioning of the folios as individual spaces of artistic experiment. These individual spaces signify as much according to the totality’s logic of meaning as they are self-signifying and self-contained. By overemphasizing the rhetorical and semantic power of the whole over its parts, Roxburgh tends to reduce the album’s individual

items to a series of art samples whose mode of meaning production is entirely submitted to this logic about collecting and art historical sequencing.

*THE SUM BUT ALSO THE PARTS*

The sophisticated artistry of the folios taken individually clearly shows that at some level the procedural logic of assembling images and calligraphies into an art collection yields to differently determined creative processes, precisely those processes that are less predetermined than an autonomous pictorial space allows. The complex deconstructive and reconstructive collages, the premeditated and skillful effects of cutting, pasting, assembling, and shaping of the items, can be seen as the equivalent of installations on a two-dimensional plane with all the intentional optical and semantic implications these organizing plastic strategies entail (Fig. 4). This elaborate use of part of the whole for pure creativity is partly what distinguishes the Persian album as an aesthetic entity from the structurally analogous constructs intended for more utilitarian or pragmatic objectives, such as albums of family photographs, herbaria, or collections of scientific drawings, whose logistics uniformly govern the corpus's assemblage and its components, fusing together meanings and logic of intention, practice and result. If similar to, say, the scientific credo of a medical album of anatomical depictions, the Persian album's art historical credo provides the organizing thread suturing the parts into the whole; unlike the former, the latter does not enclose each separate unit into its narrowly defined semantic sphere. Intelligibility and coherence of meaning are not the only purposes of the articulation of the Persian album's pieces, as indeed the preface writer Dust Muhammad suggests in his evocation of the aesthetic trope of "freedom of interpretation."<sup>12</sup> To grasp this other dimension of the Persian album, including its part in creation beyond intentionality, a change of analytical viewpoint, reasoning, and method is mandatory.<sup>13</sup>

To begin, the Persian album's aesthetic ontology is definitely a topic to ponder. Owing to its double ontological constitution of the totality/sum of its parts/separate devices, it forms an open structure playing aesthetically with both its unifying logic and the diversity of its individual specimens. The coherently arranged body of pieces harmonizes forms and meaning only to a certain extent, as its segmental morphology diffracts the artistic display into a multiplicity of ontologically autonomous entities, thus creating a great variety of semantic structures. As a result, the art historical scheme does not operate fluidly and uniformly throughout the album, and does not fully or absolutely control the aesthetic workings of the entire construct, as Roxburgh suggests. We could even say that the art collecting and storytelling concepts only constitute a point of departure, the stimulus of a multidirectional creative process renewing and reinventing itself at the successive levels of the album's stratified constituents. Meaning flows, fluctuates, and slips back and forth

between the two ends of the album medium's stepped organization, from the single bit of image within one page's enclosure to the entire compilation of folios, in a dialectical mode empowering alternately the semantic properties of the parts and of their sum. This aesthetic system enables the art contained in the Persian album to both follow and break away from the order of the whole in an oscillating dialectic between two extreme modes of meaning production: the heuristic and aporetic.

#### *PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE ALBUM*

Strongly determinative in this process are the structures of beholding that this type of art form phenomenologically induces. The fragmented morphology and sequential imagery of the Persian album automatically engages two modes of viewing, browsing/roaming and scrutinizing/zooming, which I call "macroviewing" and "microviewing." While macroviewing/browsing throughout the artifact and with the heuristic aid of the preface, the beholder cognizes the medium's assembling logic. Accordingly, the viewer experiences it holistically as an art collection. But when the beholder proceeds with a pinpointed microviewing of a single folio, he/she enters another uniquely designed fictional world. The collecting rhetoric then becomes a conceptual background more or less effective for or relevant to the folio's aesthetic singularities and the beholder's response to them. The Chinese thematic pictures representing a bird(s) on a branch occasionally inserted in Persian albums illustrates in clear terms this aesthetic phenomenology of the whole and the parts.<sup>14</sup>

These pictures may take on different functions and ontological status whether they are seen through macro- or microviewing. Informed by the declared art historical order of the album, macroviewing logically situates the Chinese depictions in a historically oriented perspective with other images with similar settings within or without the album. This process of "interpictoriality" or "intervisuality," as Roxburgh named it, inserts the Chinese items within a chain of active linkages with cognate imagery formed by various connective means, comparison, repetition, imitation, allusion, reference, and so on.<sup>15</sup> For example, the Chinese originals may be seen in comparison with their copies or interpretative versions by Persian artists. In this transpictorial light, the Chinese images' aesthetic qualities and function are redefined and reevaluated according to the criteria of art making in the Persian world. Thus they fully play the role of samples of Chinese art in the Persian historical rhetoric of the album's construct.

Under microvision the same artifacts may be perceived and understood in different ways that may have little or nothing to do with the art historical shaping scheme. In changing the frame of viewing from an interpictorial to an intrapictorial perspective, the mode of seeing seizes and interprets the

image in correlation with its immediate surroundings and the particular plastic manipulation it has been through in order to be inserted. Different configurations may appear. For instance, a simple and rather neutral framing with no or just a few discrete surrounding pieces would keep at the minimal level the transformative effect of the recontextualization of the Chinese piece in the Persian aesthetic milieu, thereby preserving most of its inherent qualities and features as a typical Chinese depiction of a bird on a branch. In this case, the original ontology of the picture does not receive much alteration; therefore, the folio may be defined as an intentional reconstitution of a Chinese-style aesthetic event in a Persian pictorial environment.<sup>16</sup> It may be concluded inductively that under intrapictorial gazing and in these rather neutral conditions of appearing, the almost intact Chinese tableau de nature may be enjoyed and appreciated per se, with or without the cognitive interferences of the album's art historical logic of interpictureality. It is up to the viewer as an active participant and meaning-shaper in the artistic construction to integrate, put aside, or erase these interferences external to the folio's local meanings.

More transformative plastic manipulations may assign to the same Chinese pictures yet another function provoking again a shift of aesthetic ontology. A radically altering, quasi-disfiguring procedure frequently occurs in the Persian albums' collages. It consists in juxtaposing recycled and severely cropped pieces, sometimes just reduced to bits, with other items in sharp disjunction within the densely designed folio like a cubist montage.<sup>17</sup> In such complex settings, the image of the bird on a branch loses most of its original properties to transmute itself into a pattern of a re-created constructivist artifact decidedly Persian in nature, characterized by its aggregated, compartmentalized, and essentially aporetic aesthetic. The Chinese identity of the item becomes secondary, residual, and as a result, its semantic impact in the album's art historical metanarrative fades significantly.

In summary, any painting or drawing within the Persian album possesses the double ability to reinforce or, on the contrary, to tone down or silence the rhetoric of the assemblage about collecting and telling art histories. Consequently, it can be cognitively experienced at both the holistic and atomistic level. By extension, locally, within the single page's frame, the painting or drawing has the potency to reshape the aesthetic scheme of the whole into something else, experienceable without expectations, as an unknown by deconditioned immersion. These microaesthetic systems of the folios are to be hermeneutically investigated for a better understanding of the Persian album. As the practice of making such objects in Mughal India comes from Iran, this analysis applies to the Mughal album as well, although it fosters a very different art.

The latter remark leads us to return to the historiography on the Mughal pictorial oeuvre, which does not deliver anything comparable to Roxburgh's insights. The rare aesthetic interpretations of this material are questionable,

particularly in their interpretations of hybridity. And although this trope calls loudly for critical attention, it has been mostly examined with outdated, traditional art historical methods. Monica Juneja hints at this state of affairs in her review of the latest all-inclusive book on Mughal painting by Som Prakash Verma: “The result is a collection which affords interesting glimpses into neglected corners of a well-trod terrain, pointing the way to newer openings, and yet one which is marred by conceptual limitations that are symptomatic of the failure of much of art history of precolonial South Asia to respond to the challenges that require the discipline to reflect upon the contingency of its premises.”<sup>18</sup> Our assessment intends to show these problems in detail and thus clear the way for future research.

### A Discipline Marked by “the Syndrome of Marco Polo”

Patterns produced by different sensibilities of ethnocentrism shape the history of Mughal painting in antithetic currents. On the postcolonial intellectual scene, Edward Said famously denounced a particular form of ethnocentrism, Eurocentrism, in *Orientalism*, previously quoted. The culture theorist Gerardo Mosquera, more focused on the arts and aesthetics and expanding the discourse beyond Said’s “Oriental” confines, dubbed any form of ethnocentrism “the syndrome of Marco Polo,” after the title of an artwork by the Cuban artist Flavio Garcíandia, *El Síndrome de Marco Polo*, exhibited in 1986.<sup>19</sup> This artwork thematizes the issues raised by “the experience of understanding the Other” that may also arise in the study of phenomena of cross-cultural encounter and hybridity. In fact, symptoms of this syndrome are plentiful in the academic writings on Mughal painting. Three main tendencies-symptoms can be detected: the old-but-persistent Eurocentrism, the less obvious Asiacentrism or excessive pan-Asianism, and a subcurrent, an “anti-Persian pan-Indianism,” more hidden and usually not cognized or criticized.<sup>20</sup>

Entrenched in the nineteenth-century Western manner of practicing non-Western art history, a great part of this scholarship oscillates between frank Eurocentrism and more subtle expressions of it. Art historians from or educated in the West and their followers from other parts of the world clearly manifest the syndrome when they overvalorize the European element and overestimate its contribution to the Mughal pictorial idiom. In response to this shortcoming, a counter-discourse has developed that revisits the Europeans’ contribution and aims to reinterpret the Mughal modalities of appropriation of foreign art forms with more objectivity. However, in some instances this discourse has also degenerated into another ideologically driven pattern, that of Asiacentrism. This pattern has never been openly pointed out in the history of Mughal painting as it has been always overshadowed by the decried velleities of Western intellectual hegemony. Yet, any form of

pronounced pan-Asianism, equally marked by affect, subjectivity, prejudices, and nationalistic biases, turns out to be as stereotyping and misleading as its Eurocentric counterpart. To echo Mosquera, I call this particular ethnocentric stream “the Asiatic syndrome.” The latter manifests itself in its systematic minimization of the European contribution, ultimately as wrong as its overestimation.

Moreover, more subtly, while indulging in the building of bridges between the Persianate and the Renaissance and Baroque world through the analysis of historical evidences such as object circulation, travelers’ journeys, diplomatic relationships, or stylistic affinities in the arts, some scholars with pan-Asian tendencies nevertheless show much less ease in acknowledging or investigating the possibility of more profound linkages of an intellectual or philosophical nature. It is as if they fear that unraveling such linkages would compromise the Indo-Islamic cultural identity and overempower the European element. If the challenging hybridity of the Mughal pictorial aesthetic nevertheless forces the admittance of processes of Mughal-European cross-fertilization, these scholars would still argue that the Mughal convergence with Europe took on the form of either a “resistance” to the foreign influx, a superficial and just playful use of it, or an absorption of it into the Mughal-Persianate aesthetics that would have processed it to the point of denaturation. The fact that, before the changes of the seventeenth century the dynamic of artistic exchange between Europe and India was characterized by asymmetry, with an active and productive transculturation only on the Mughal side, did not help sufferers of the Marco Polo syndrome.<sup>21</sup>

The curious amalgam of all these affects—lingering postcolonial feelings of loss and anger, nationalistic sensibilities and sympathies, super-resistant pan-Western inclinations, and other subjective pro- and anti-attitudes—has severely obscured understanding of the hybrid phenomenon in Mughal painting. The following overview of scholarly writings on this material illustrates this state of affairs.

### **Success and Failure of the Aesthetic Approach to Mughal Painting in the Historiography**

In a field dominated by traditional art history, Gregory Minissale’s critical study of Mughal painting is unique and stimulating in terms of methodology and content.<sup>22</sup> The great merit of his book, *Images of Thoughts*, is its proposal for alternative perspectives in research, integrating twentieth-century art and culture theories as well as the too-rarely offered comparative study with Western art. However, the interesting developments he proposes are mixed with some debatable interpretations. As the present study constitutes a similar critical attempt, a thorough critique of Minissale’s findings is mandatory.<sup>23</sup>

*"IMAGES OF THOUGHT," BY GREGORY MINISSALE: MISINTERPRETATION OF THE MUGHAL PICTORIAL METAPHYSICS*

The first chapter, "Reading Anti-illusionism," sets the tone with the radical argument that Mughal painting is fundamentally "anti-illusionist." In this Minissale follows other scholars that have attempted to downplay the role of European art in the elaboration of the Mughal pictorial language in order to strengthen the positioning of this art within the category of Persianate production, which is uniformly characterized as fundamentally idealistic and modal. This view springs from a reaction against the Eurocentric current just evoked, but it also falls into the trap of Asiacentrism. The fraught notion of "anti-illusionism" resounds like an anti-imperialist slogan that echoes some academic works similarly charged with negative connotations regarding the European component of Mughal painting. Those works include Amina Okada's perception of a Mughal refusal to surrender to the seductions of Western art, Gülru Necipoğlu's vision of a Mughal painting bound to a modal system diluting European realism into what she presents as convention-dependent Persianate plasticity, and critically baseless comparativist evaluations such as "In Mughal eyes, two-dimensional idealism obviously represented a higher truth than fully illusionist representation."<sup>24</sup>

There is no such thing as a lower perception of European art or an "anti-illusionism" in the pictorial culture of early Modern Mughal India. These notions exude hostility and contradict the consistent development of an aesthetic concept of realism and an open reception of European artistic features in Mughal painting until Aurangzeb's reign (1659–1707)<sup>25</sup> (Figs. 5–10). The "non-illusionist" strategies such as abstraction, geometric design, and graphic patterning that intermingle with illusionist modes in Mughal images are not to be confused with "anti-illusionism," which consists of an attitude of rejection or deconstruction of the aesthetic concept of realism as observed in the history of European painting in the Modern period. The notion of "anti-illusionism" simply does not fit the evolution of Mughal painting, which from its inception was based on its exact opposite—the steady rise of realism that facilitated the integration of European mimetic techniques. Attempts to classify Mughal painting in oppositional, competitive, or hierarchical terms of Persianate versus European distorts and simplifies the complex Mughal processes of aesthetic transculturation.

The second chapter of Minissale's book, "Reading Pictorial Order," skillfully deciphers the symbolic functions of variously designed geometric networks that in Mughal imagery weave meaningful symbolic linkages between figures such as relationships of authority, submission, or love (Figs. 11–12). However, Minissale excessively forces and enforces the power of geometry, presented as the dominant meaning-producing device in the images' conceptualization. This interpretation, driven by the same Asiacentric theory of an anti-illusionist, modal, and immutably Persian-Persianate Mughal

pictorial idiom, downplays the determining power of spatial and naturalistic representational devices such as three-dimensional landscapes or physiognomic portraits projecting images in mundane reality. Consequently, if this chapter illuminates the constructivist workings of geometry in the paintings' semiotic and plastic structure, it does not offer a sustainable response to the thorny question of the conception of the visible underpinning the Mughal figural regime.

*PROBLEMATIC USE OF THEORY*

The third chapter, "Reading Myth," engages in a Northrop Frye/Mircea Eliade-style discussion on a selection of mythological and allegorical themes represented in Mughal miniatures such as "the cave," "the mirror," "water," "wisdom," or "piety." But this discussion overgeneralizes and could



5 *The Monkeys Finding Their Own Dwelling Devoid of the Aggressors besides Themselves with Joy, 1570. From The Anvār-i Suhaili: Or, The Lights of Canopus. Mughal India. School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*

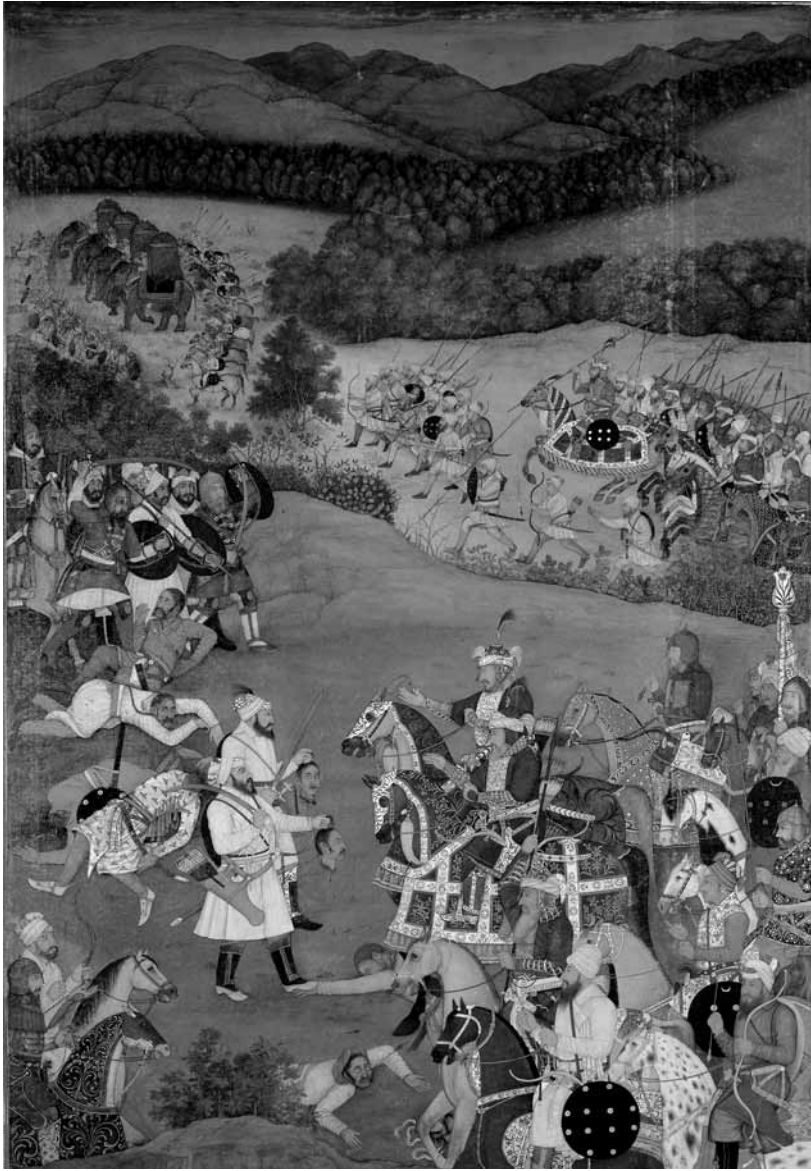
apply to other Persianate pictorial schools and periods, despite the author's attempt to root this widespread thematic in the Indo-Muslim context. Therefore not much is revealed about Mughal visuality in this essay. More stimulating is the last section, "Reading Reflexivity," which calls attention to the unexplored topic of reflexivity featured in Mughal self-portraits and representations of pictorial representation. However, again, unfortunately the argumentation often loses sight of the object under observation and detects reflection and reflexive instances everywhere in the paintings. As a result, the genuine occurrences of the concept are diluted in a stylish but obscuring *mise en abyme* of the trope of reflexivity itself.<sup>26</sup> This type of elliptic discourse tends to be not only inconclusive but also has the perverse effect of giving the tenants of traditional art history reason to question the benefits of theory.



6 *Hamid Bhakari Punished by Akbar*, attributed to Manohar (active c. 1582–1624), c. 1604. Illustrated album leaf from *The Akbarnama of Abu'l-Fazl* (1551–1602). Mughal India. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. Theodore M. Davis Collection. © 2000–2014 Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights reserved



7 *Diana, Goddess of the Hunt*, illustrated album leaf, early seventeenth century. Mughal India. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. Theodore M. Davis Collection. © 2000–2014 Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights reserved



8 *Khan Dawran Receiving the Heads of Jujhar Singh and His Son Bikramajit (January 1636)*, by Payag, c. 1656–57. Mughal India. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper. Courtesy of Royal Collection Trust.  
© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2014

### Gauvin A. Bailey's Works: Mughal Pictorial Hybridity Seen through Jesuit Lenses

Apart from Minissale's hermeneutic propositions, we are left with the more established art historical literature in which Gauvin Bailey's works occupy a special place due to their systematic critical exploration of artistic hybridity. A specialist in Jesuit cultural history and Renaissance and Baroque art, Bailey's exhaustive exploration of the artistic culture developed in the context of the Jesuit missions has been instrumental to studies of Mughal painting, in which his work is regularly quoted.<sup>27</sup> He presents Mughal material from the viewpoint of the fate of Counter-Reformation art in the Mughal cultural framework, which is in fact an external viewpoint. In this perspective, the Indian artifacts form a component of the broader production of Asian and South American hybrid arts born of the cultural encounter with Catholic Europe in the early Modern period (Fig. 9). With Som Prakash Verma and Ebba Koch, whom we will consider, he is among the most important historians of Mughal painting who have thoroughly interpreted the significance of the West for and in Mughal artistic culture. Yet, I align myself with Muzzafar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, who wrote, "while we have profited greatly from these studies, we also distance ourselves from many of the interpretations proposed by the author."<sup>28</sup> For Bailey's essays are indeed as informative as they are problematic.<sup>29</sup>



9 *The Death of Ananias*, after a design by Raphael, c. 1650–1710. Mughal India. Ink on paper. © Asian Art Museum of San Francisco. Used by permission

Early Modern and colonial history forces us to sense certain perils beyond the promises of the formidable enterprise of investigating the Jesuit cultural legacy and of looking “at this interaction on the global scale, comparing the variety of artistic approaches by European agents with the even more varied responses by non-European host societies.”<sup>30</sup> This paradigm, at once macroscopic and microscopic, is per se perfectly legitimate. It allows one to consider apiece the links, parallels, and discrepancies between different artistic formations as well as shared patterns such as the use of Christian imagery and European mimetic techniques. However, this approach to a highly diverse material, reflecting very distinct local histories, through the highly specific Jesuit lens, necessarily carries a heavy risk of distortion or reductionism. According to Alam and Subrahmanyam, who do not separate the historical and art historical logics from one another, this approach creates a “tunnel vision” that produces “a false sense of where the order itself stood in a variety of highly contested and conflict-ridden early Modern contexts.”<sup>31</sup> Extreme circumspection, nuance, and a low ideological profile would have helped avoid such interpretative slippages. But Bailey prefers to express his views frankly. Solid theoretical justification and a rhetoric of reassuring declarations such as “the story is not about the triumph of Western culture but of cultural encounter” do not ward off the distorting effect of this scholar’s pan-Jesuit vision on his argumentation.<sup>32</sup>

Bailey’s vision expresses itself unambiguously in assertions proclaiming the all-embracing benevolent power of the Jesuits and the universality of the art they promoted: “Eminently adaptable and appealing to a wide popular audience, the *arte sacra* of the Late Renaissance and Baroque was deftly capable of becoming the first truly global style in the arts. ... ‘Jesuit mission art’ was a global partnership with the Other.”<sup>33</sup> Exemplary in its promotion of the “abstract and essentialized notion of culture and civilization formed in the mirror image of the Western concept of civilization,” Bailey’s work celebrates the Jesuit ideations about the world.<sup>34</sup> Throughout his writings, strong positive words like “dialogue,” “partnership,” “tolerance,” “accommodation,” and so on depict a pacific well-intended missiological spirit and a hyper-tolerant Jesuit psyche. Yet, this rosy description hardly reflects the much more ambiguous history of the Order in the early Modern era.<sup>35</sup>

*“IS THERE A CASE FOR THE FOREIGN MISSIONARY?”*

I am compelled to repeat Pearl S. Buck’s famous question (paraphrased here) in the framework of Bailey’s discussions of the Jesuits and to deconstruct his key notion of “partnership.”<sup>36</sup> Usually, the latter concept signifies a conception of alterity characterized by some form of symmetry if not equality between the partners. In the context of a religious mission, it would therefore entail some form of exchange or reciprocity in spiritual belief that could not possibly

take place in the one-way relationship the Jesuit missionaries had with their target populations. What Bailey designates as a “partnership” was above all a well-planned strategy for Catholic proselytism that sought to eliminate the Other’s faith and religious customs. If the Jesuit missionaries were not seeking to conquer the Other’s land, and did provide services and protection to the natives in the face of the unspeakable injustices brought on by the conquistadores, the Jesuits were quite definitely working to conquer the Other’s mind. This endeavor relied on domination therefore I would rather denominate the so-called Jesuit partner with James Joyce’s words “soldier of God” from his autobiographic novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.<sup>37</sup>

In this novel the Irish writer depicts a scene where the rector of the Jesuit College Saint Francis Xavier in Dublin delivers a tirade to the glory of the famous Spanish missionary before an audience of young students. It is worth quoting an excerpt of this speech, which through Joyce’s veil of rebellion, reveals a penetrating understanding of the Jesuit psyche much truer to the historic reality than Bailey’s:

He is called, as you know, the apostle of the Indies. He went from country to country in the East, from Africa to India, from India to Japan, baptizing the people. He is said to have baptized as many as ten thousand idolaters in one month. It is said that his right arm had grown powerless from having been raised so often over the heads of those whom he baptized. He wish then to go to China to win still more souls for God, but he died of fever on the island of Sancian. A great saint, saint Francis Xavier! A great soldier of God! ...

He had the faith in him that moves mountains. Ten thousand souls won for God in a single month! That is a true conqueror, true to the motto of our order: *ad majorem Dei gloriam!*<sup>38</sup>

It is difficult to ignore that the Jesuits’ systematic campaign was part of the broader European colonial project. For all these reasons, in the period concerned the Catholic missionaries were more conquerors than partners, and wherever and whenever they could establish authority the encounter featured a not-so-desirable paternalism. And how could those who supported a Church that persecuted people of Jewish and Muslim ancestry on the Iberian Peninsula be genuinely tolerant and open-minded toward the faithful of Islam and other religions in the subcontinent? Bailey argues that “The Society played two different roles in Europe and abroad,” and “was on the cutting edge of accommodation” in the outer-circle missions (outside Europe).<sup>39</sup> Still, the pragmatism that prompted expatriate Jesuits to relinquish the infamous methods of coercion practiced in Europe is not to be confused with a profound change of mind-set. The Jesuit perception of the native inhabitants of the missions’ territories was not very different from their perception of the confessional minorities in Europe. In those remote lands, the “Other” was still considered a barbarian to educate. For example, an account by Diogo do

Couto, a Portuguese chronicler, states of Akbar's father, Humayun, "And thus this *barbarian* was so fond of Christians that whenever he saw them, he gave them great honour and grants."<sup>40</sup>

Aside from a concern for historical accuracy, a less passionate interpretation of Jesuit cultural history is a necessary precondition for a more truthful interpretation of these global hybrid arts of the period.

#### ABOUT THE "INDIAN CASE"

Bailey conceptualizes Mughal material as the "Indian case" for what he designates "missionary art, for want of a better term."<sup>41</sup> This definition may apply to artistic productions in some mission milieus, but as far as Mughal India is concerned it does not fit at all its complex polymorphic art and culture. Bailey's Jesuit-centric projection tends to misrepresent the originality of Mughal painting as an outcome of the Renaissance and Baroque art brought to Mogor (European designation of the Mughal land) by the missionaries, whereas what correctly could be termed "mission art" forms just one aspect of the Mughal hybrid pictoriality.<sup>42</sup> Among Europeanizing imagery, itself pluralistic, the corpus of Jesuit-inspired items consists of copies, translations, and interpretations of visual material directly brought by the Society of Jesus' members at the Mughal court or acquired through trade and gifts. The archaeology of Mughal book art has amply evidenced this insertion of Counter-Reformation iconography in the Mughal pictorial vocabulary.<sup>43</sup> But Bailey's interpretation of this Mughal "mission" material calls for examination as it shadows the concept of aesthetic hybridity in Mughal painting.

Bailey's overemphasis on the Jesuit factor places the impact of *arte sacra* and European plasticity at the center of the Mughal creative dynamic, and credits the Jesuits with major Mughal aesthetic developments like pictorial realism and anthropocentrism. Even when he acknowledges the recipients' inventive processing of the European import, Bailey maintains this perspective as he condescendingly declares, "The non-European participants even had the upper hand in shaping mission art."<sup>44</sup> Applied to Mughal art this sweeping postulate minimizes the role not only of the multicultural local artistic forces but also of the other non-Jesuit European agencies, both secular and religious, that participated in the introduction of Western and Christian pictorial forms to the Mughals. These European agencies include other Christian orders that set out to proselytize in India before the Society of Jesus, as well as commercial, cultural, and political factors such as trade, travelers, merchants, diplomatic envoys, and so on, very active early in the beginning of the Modern era.<sup>45</sup> Bailey minimizes this important contribution, stating that "the art of England, and later Holland, would never achieve the influence on Mughal art and ideology that Catholic art had exerted before them, for the conduit of high level intellectual discourse had been shut off with the end of the *Ibadatkhana* debates."<sup>46</sup>

Bailey's interpretation of Mughal creative forces, vaguely termed the "main stream" or "the indigenous element" of Mogor's mission art, nevertheless offers some insights. For example, he underscores the sense of drama in Indian culture as a factor that favored the reception of the *arte sacra*. Yet, like other experts of Mughal art who also note this factor, Bailey does not define, clarify, and develop this notion into an instructive discussion. On the other hand, he ponders at length the Mughals' translation of foreign forms for their own needs, although he follows the line of other art historians who use and abuse the standard argument that "The emperors harnessed Catholic devotional iconography and Indian and Islamic symbols to communicate their message of divinely-sanctioned kingship."<sup>47</sup>



10 Study of Akbar's head, attributed to Govardhan, 1600–1605. Mughal India.  
© British Library Board

Nevertheless, unlike most scholars, Bailey attempts to go beyond this consensual determination by exploring spiritual connections between Mughal and Christian Western culture that may have facilitated their artistic syncretism in the Mughal context. But, despite the many references Bailey collected from Christian, Hindu, and Islamic sources, the results of his research are spoiled by questionable statements, oversimplifications, and numerous errors, as well as statements such as this: "Meaning, after all, is in the eye of the beholder, and both sides interpret it according to their own traditions."<sup>48</sup>

#### *A QUESTIONABLE PERCEPTION OF ISLAM*

In addition, it is also impossible to ignore Bailey's lapses in basic knowledge on Islam.<sup>49</sup> For example, he mistakenly asserts an absence of devotional images in the Islamic tradition. Let us just recall the existence of examples of an openly religious Islamic imagery that includes the illustrations of Muhammad's miraculous night journey to the heavens (*mi'raj*), the representation of his relics and some events in his life, depictions of the Ka'ba, as well as numerous paintings and objects inviting to mystical or spiritual experience by means of metaphor, allusion, or suggestion.<sup>50</sup> Elsewhere, Bailey strangely classifies the gate to Akbar's tomb in Sikandra as religious architecture.<sup>51</sup>

In the category of unfortunate comments, Bailey tells us that Shahjahani painting "did not require great learning" and was "easily grasped by the masses"<sup>52</sup> (Figs. 8, 13–14). Aside from the bad judgment reflected in that

remark, the statement is inaccurate. Except for some larger images publicly displayed for particular occasions, the illustrated manuscripts were produced for private circles of customers or small groups of privileged viewers. In the same vein is the subtly derogatory presentation of Islam that punctuates Bailey's claims. Muslim culture appears in his work as less tolerant or more exclusive than other cultures. For instance, he argues, "Although an Islamic State, the Mughal Empire was ruled by dynasties with Mongol roots who inherited their forebears' religious tolerance and curiosity about Christianity. The shamanist Mongol religion was open to borrowings from other faiths, and early Mongol rulers such as Chingis (Ghenghis) Khan (d. 1227) made it official policy to respect all religions without favouritism and to honour all priests and holy men."<sup>53</sup>

This excerpt suggests that the causes of the Mughals' religious openness are not found in their Muslim faith but in Mongol influence. Finally, a telling statement epitomizing Bailey's bias concludes this critique: "Yet there has to have been something in European art which most other art styles did not have."<sup>54</sup>

Other historians of Mughal art, while not tackling the topic of hybridity with an elaborate introductory reflection as did Bailey, share with him some problematic features in their interpretation of the European factor. For example, although much more subtly, Ebba Koch also attributes to European art special powers that would make it stand out among other global artistic productions, stating: "The Europeanizing mode of expression had the power of synthesizing various artistic traditions—especially those of the Muslims and Hindus—on a neutral level."<sup>55</sup> In the same train of thought, Punam Madhock, who endorsed unconditionally Bailey's views, wrote, "Biblical subjects reflected universal principles and could therefore serve as symbols [in Mughal painting]."<sup>56</sup> These art historians are part of the mainstream of Mughal art studies, the focus of attention below.

### **Affect and Sensibility in Mainstream Art History of Mughal Painting**

Orientalistic-Eurocentric bias plagues the art history of Mughal painting, in particular that of the Shahjahani period. These studies, among them Ebba Koch's leading work, present the pictorial practice in Shah Jahan's era as a factory crafting "appropriate images in an official style" in a coercive environment under the strict control of the patron-ruler with little "freedom" of expression—hence, the artwork's "uniform standard of quality."<sup>57</sup> Koch argues that Shah Jahan had "absolute control of the pictorial world and its laws of representation," and that "Artistic freedom was suppressed almost as thoroughly as political freedom," thus leaving "a narrow margin of licence for the artist."<sup>58</sup>

*THE ORIENTALISTIC TROPE OF THE OVERCONTROLLING MUGHAL PATRON*

Such a vision of this art, as a serial production for state propaganda made in a fascistic atmosphere, is reminiscent of certain episodes of twentieth-century cultural history. Some of Koch's descriptions make Shahjahani painting appear as the Mughal analogue of some twentieth-century propagandist social realistic artworks: "a mechanical collection of individuals ... all in a linear array that contradicts the perspective of the architectural setting. They are crammed into the space below the Emperor, and one has to take a close look at the dense crowd of overlapping figures to be able to make out where it has been divided into two facing groups to give the profile portraits some inner logic." And the narrative thus develops. Under these oppressive work conditions, Koch continues, it is on account of some exceptionally skilled individuals that some masterpieces were created, "depending on their ingenuity and talent for exploring the limited artistic freedom allowed to them."<sup>59</sup> The borrowing of foreign models in particular, enabled painters to create more opportunities for pictorial experiments and variety so that "Within these parameters there was also a margin for artistic variation, where the painter could express himself more freely."<sup>60</sup>

It is easy to see the problematic subjectivity of this interpretation. First, the latter suggestion that the Shahjahani artists found an opportunity to circumvent stifling rules of artistic production in the appropriation of exogenous traditions implies that, to be able to create, they had to look outward to find structures of art making that were more open and suitable to inventiveness. Cultural borrowing can be a thoughtful strategy motivated by many purposes other than filling a need created by a lack or a weakness. Since it cannot be said that the Mughals were lacking in terms of artistic resources, Mughal artistic transculturation cannot be explained by the existence of a frustration or a need for compensation.

Second, Koch's pounding rhetoric concerning a lack of artistic freedom and despotism at the Mughal court subtly creates opposition between uncommunicative and mechanical Shahjahani painting and undesignated but more human pictorial expressions flourishing in unnamed but freer coeval geopolitical spaces. One may wonder then whether she and holders of similar views infer that this somewhere else, this early Modern *Eldorado* of politico-cultural liberty was not Europe itself. But the Papal States or the monarchies of France, Spain, and England can hardly be considered more democratic polities than Shahjahani India, while the arts at these European courts were no less visual political manifests and ideological instruments than those commissioned by the Mughal emperor. Plainly, the Western Modernist double topos of the free artist in a free country is irrelevant and anachronistic in the analysis of early Modern Mughal painting.

Another Eurocentric bias characterizes the association Ebba Koch and others make between three features of the Shahjahani pictorial practice—namely, its system of conventions, the exploration of the pictures' margins filled with figural formations, and the development of illusionism (Figs. 8, 13–14). Koch writes, “To explore these margins for free representation to the fullest advantage, some painters developed a stunning illusionism, which ... in its best and freest expressions ... has hardly an equal in the history of painting.”<sup>61</sup> And while landscapes allowed the artists to fulfill their desire for illusionism “more freely without formal imposition,” in the realm of portraiture figures realistically depicted composed what she describes in politico-military terms as “the domain of the enemy” that “was predestined for such free form of representation.”<sup>62</sup>

This tripartite equation between freedom of creation, plastic realism, and artistic accomplishment inevitably projects on this Mughal material the nineteenth-century system of aesthetic values subtended by the past European logic of cultural hegemony. In particular, the laudatory linkage between development of illusionist expression and supreme artistic fulfillment, if only by logical inference, posits abstract and idealist forms as inferior in quality and negatively indicative of a restrictive and constrained structure of art making. It is time to discard these archaic thoughts about Mughal artists elevating themselves by mastering illusionist art and, through it, enjoying artistic liberty. The phenomenon of realism in Mughal painting must be revisited with more objective critical parameters that, to begin with, do not amalgamate the two very distinct notions of progress in the practice of illusionism and the practice of illusionism as progress. While the former notion signifies technical improvement in the illusionist manipulation by means of skill acquisition, the latter notion conceptualizes the strategy of illusionism as an improvement by comparison with other stylistic practices deemed less advanced and less expressive. Clearly, the display of high-level skills in mimetic rendering in Shahjahani miniature bespeaks a certain degree of technical accomplishment that contributes to the great quality of this art. However, the same observation applies to the other non-mimetic pictorial methods employed in the crafting of these images. Therefore, putting forward the mastery of illusionism alone to prove artistic achievement in this period amounts to judging this achievement according to taste and sensibility. It is certainly not an elucidatory act.

#### *OTHER PAN-, PRO-, AND ANTI-LEANINGS*

The difficult question of realism in Mughal painting has also exacerbated the other form of ethnocentrism that I term “anti-Persian pan-Indianism” or “India-centrism,” which is quite apparent for example in Som Prakash

Verma's extensive work. His analysis of Mughal animal pictures is emblematic in this regard. In examining the attitude toward animals in Mughal and Persian culture, Verma compares and contrasts each culture's approach to animal representation. Carried away by pan-Indian sentiment, he attempts to demonstrate that the aesthetic difference between the Persian and Mughal style of picturing animals reflects two antagonistic prehensions of them.<sup>63</sup> In what appears to be confusion between a difference of sensibility and a difference of quality in sensitivity toward animals, to this scholar's eyes indifference or coldness in the Persian world would explain the strategy of stylization, while the more naturalistic Mughal style stems from a love for animals in Indian culture. This idea is expressed in these tense assertions, "The Mughal painters who never adhered to the linear and idealized forms of the Persian school . . . . The Mughal painter never accepted the Persian mode of depicting birds and animals which is purely linear and descriptive in character, but instead always aimed at portraying the animal as an individual with emphasis on physiognomy . . . . One can observe a shift from strict conventions of Persian art in the depiction of animal figures represented in the miniatures of the *Anwar-i Suhaili*"<sup>64</sup> (Fig. 5). Things get further contrasted in this contention full of affect stipulating that "An Indian element that is sympathy with the animal world, further gave rise to emotions and feelings" conveyed in Mughal art . . . "But in no way is the animal world the subject of 'adoration' in their [the Iranians] art as it is in the sculpture and painting of Ancient India. Mughal painters clearly aimed at the portrayal of physical reality where spiritual and emotional matters hardly had a place."<sup>65</sup>

Finally, a comment about another trend in the historiography—namely, the plethora of catalogs and books based on museum and library collections and exhibitions.<sup>66</sup> Overall, characterized by a tranquil conservatism and a more neutral tone, these luxurious publications form a solid and useful block of historical knowledge that integrates the scholarly findings accumulated in the last decades and reshapes them in a concise manner adapted to the enhancement of collections, particular themes, or public cultural events. However, more generalizing and compiling than hermeneutic or critical, these books cannot replace methodologically updated research. I will dare to say that the flow of these publications, which surpass in pace and quantity the flow of probing scholarly works, is indicative of the discipline's overall stagnation and traditionalism—except for some rare but promising works, some of them unpublished doctoral dissertations, to which we will refer. This compound of traditionalism and subjectivity has a faithful companion in the many category mistakes and conceptual inaccuracies made, by the standards of contemporary art history.

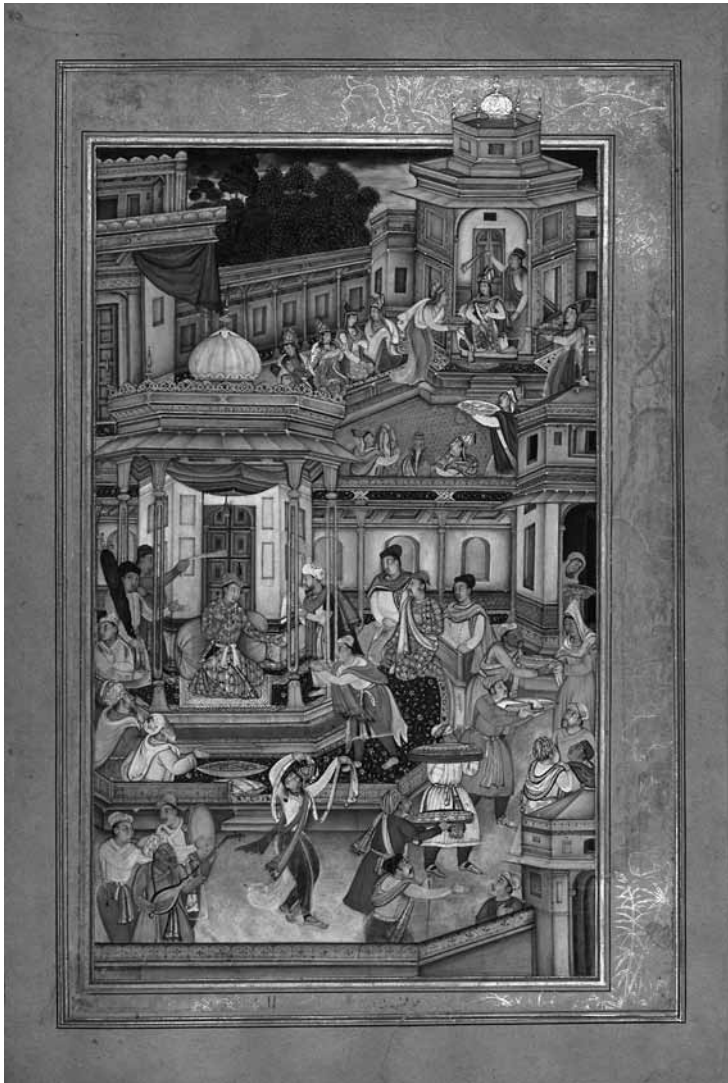
### Category Mistakes, Conceptual Inaccuracies, and Problematic Terminology

Specialists in Mughal painting along with many Islamic art historians show little concern for the exact meaning of the conceptual tools they use in their practice, and even less for the theoretical support necessary to understand them. This epistemic pattern is not without repercussion in the interpretive work. One major visual concept affected by deeply anchored misconceptions is that of abstraction, and by extension also stylized figuration and ornament. The academic writings betray a clear discomfort when faced with a mute or non-discursive design, and no story told to rely on to produce an explanatory narrative. For example, the abstract and stylized forms in Persianate painting in general are most often loosely labeled “decorative,” “mannerist,” or “formal,” and appear inconsistently appreciated in the studies.<sup>67</sup>

#### *THE MISUNDERSTOOD AESTHETIC STRATEGY OF ABSTRACTION*

Abstractive aesthetic is alternately thought to involve cognitive modalities more intellectual than sensory or the exact contrary, more sensory than intellectual, depending on the scholar’s profile and affect. For the art historians who place the highest values on illusionist representation, abstraction is perceived as an impoverishment of both technique and meaning, or conveys negative qualities of rigidity and stiffness often associated with the misunderstood trope of “formalism.” This misperception variably equates abstraction with light artistic substance, aesthetic decline, or lack of signifying power. Milo Beach’s commentary on the abstractive style of the Bukhara school (one of the Persianate branches of painting) is exemplary in this regard as he confuses abstraction with dull decoration and poor artistry: “The concern of the Bukhara painter is to create an artistically harmonious decorative image, rather than to encourage excited involvement with the story being told.”<sup>68</sup> Statements of this type conveying questionable appreciative input and signaling a poor knowledge of the workings of abstract art are routine in the historiography of painting in Islam.

Another typical description presents abstract designs as beautiful and pleasurable forms, an approach more positive and not untrue per se, but equally shallow in hermeneutic terms. Beach thus compares an Akbari painting with a Persian model: “These figures move of their own volition within a deep spatial ambient similar to our own; they are not—as they are in Bihzad’s work—primarily the means to arrange colors, lines, and shapes for our delectation”<sup>69</sup> (Figs. 6, 11–12). This ill-informed reading of abstract designs turns into derogatory judgment when it comes to the underestimated Indic book art. For example, on the Jain manuscripts’ illustrations whose graphic pulsation captures in a few abstractive lines the inner life of forms and human



11 *Shirin Receives a Ring from Khusraw*, by Farrukh, 1597–98. From *The Khamsa of Amir Khusraw Dihlavi* (died in 1328). Mughal India. Ink and pigments on laid paper.  
© Walters Art Museum, Baltimore



12 *Alexander the Great Lassoes an Opponent*, by Jagannath, 1597–1598.  
From *The Khamsa of Amir Khusraw Dihlavi* (died in 1328). Mughal India.  
© Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

expressions and emotions, one may read, "The execution is rough ... . The artist is indifferent to technical expertise or the subtlety of colors ... . The wiry, and at its best extremely vital, line drawing ..." (Figs. 15–16). Not that this view has changed since these lines were written in 1992. In the 2010 edition of the journal *Marg*, commentaries about the same images include the terms "rigid and exaggerated sharpness," and "naïve style" was the expression employed to describe them in a 2013 conference at the University of London on art and culture in India.<sup>71</sup>

The lack of perspective in the image, for some, manifests artistic failure or mediocrity. For example, a great painting by Manohar has been described in these unflattering words: "rather ungainly in its composition, the signed painting shows none of the complex tonal harmonies and dissonances, or experiments with recession and perspective that are apparent in Manohar's work in the 1595 *Khamisa* in the British Library, when he worked beside Akbar's finest artists at the height of their powers."<sup>72</sup> In fact, the painting shows a thoughtful use of abstraction. To place an emphasis on the detailed figures and the expressivity of their body language, the painter has skillfully cleared the background of details and opted for plain color fields that powerfully enhance the figural presence. Besides, the strong corporeality of the bodies, rendered by means of a subtle admixture of fine drawing and essentialized forms, constitutes a recognizable trait of this master's manner (Fig. 17). It bespeaks his imagistic conception focused on human representation as fundamental subject matter and his great capacity to translate it plastically by contrasting abstract and detailed forms.

Thus imbued with a low level of cognitivism and semantic and expressive potency, abstract and non-discursive art also appears wrongly opposed to "plastic" or "pictorial" art; a lexicon that in the studies on Mughal painting is apparently reserved to more mimetically inclined forms, as if abstractive manipulations were not plastic enough, not expressive enough, and not pictorial enough to qualify for this category. The illusionist experiments of the Shah Jahan's court painter Payag are thus contrasted with the two-dimensional designs of other Shahjahani pictorial expressions: "Payag attempts to infiltrate the linear impositions of the Shahjahani court style with forms of representation for which, he, as a Hindu, might have felt a particular affinity, based on his own autochthonous heritage, which inclined toward *the plastic arts*"<sup>73</sup> (Fig. 8). One may then ask, is not Persian painting plastic art? What would Barnett Newman, Ellsworth Kelly, or Mark Rothko think about a conceptualization of abstract and geometrical pictoriality as less plastic or non-plastic in comparison with figural-mimetic expression?

Art historians more sensitive to abstract art may also show a certain incomprehension of the concept of abstraction, such as Gülru Necipoğlu, who wrote, "By implication geometrized designs (whether figural or non-figural) and the purely geometric patterns of the *girih* mode constituted mental images



13 *Emperor Shah Jahan* (r. 1628–58), attributed to Bichitr (active c. 1610–c. 1650), possibly Mir Ali (1500–c. 1544). Folio from the Late Shah Jahan album. Mughal India. Opaque watercolor, gold, and ink on paper. Los Angeles County Museum of Art



14 *Shah Jahan with Asaf Khan*, by Bichitr (active c. 1615–40), c. 1640.  
From the Late Shah Jahan album. Mughal India.

Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper mounted on paperboard.  
Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

that were inherently superior to naturalistic representations based on sense perceptions."<sup>74</sup> This statement conveys the typical mistake of superimposing the question of abstraction and figuration on the question of sensory perception in visual art based on the incorrect assumption that abstract forms are less perceptual than figurative forms. But first, as the product of imaginal intellection, mental images can be either naturalistic or abstract; therefore, they should not be contrasted with imitative imagistic instances but rather with materially observable representations.

Second, geometric abstraction not only does not operate less at the level of the senses than figuration, it empowers the cognitive force of the forms' pure phenomenality in allowing a more direct aesthetic experience thanks to the absence of interference from any narrative or discourse between the two successive perceptive phases of sensory impact and intellective-psychic reception, that is this experience's ultimate goal.<sup>75</sup> Third, if geometric abstraction does not represent figuratively, and indeed for this reason is opposed to figurative representation, it nevertheless may do so "non-objectively" (geometric abstract art is also called "non-objective art") as it possesses an imaging power or an imagistic faculty by means other than objective representation such as suggestion, denotation, analogy, metaphor, or some form of induced symbolization.

Finally, the scholar's mistake originates not only from a misunderstanding of the aesthetic operations of geometrical abstraction but also, again, from a too-literal use of the Islamic philosophical texts as a reading grid for the artistic forms. The philosophy on which Necipoğlu based her statement distinguishes between inner/mental and outer/sensory perception, positing a superiority of the former over the latter. Yet, it does not suggest that geometry is less sensorial or ontologically less mundane than figuration. Instead, it infers that in accordance to a conception of the world divided into an inferior material-visible order and a superior immaterial-invisible order, geometric expression has a better ability than figuration to express in perceptual forms the inner essence of things, and thereby to establish a tighter connection between the mundane and these higher truths. In other words, geometry is best suited to represent (non-objectively) and communicate these truths in visual material terms. For example, geometry can materialize or visualize the religious-metaphysical concept of the perfect structuring of the universe and the heavens created by God.<sup>76</sup> In sum it figures this order in the mathematics of geometrical figures. Clearly in Islamic cultural history, geometrical forms were considered physically powerful and as such greatly valued. They were enjoyed as much for their perceptual qualities as for their ability to convey abstract metaphysical concepts and thoughts. Otherwise, why put so much care into investing the sensorial impact of geometric designs with attributes of materiality such as colors, textures, kinetic lineaments, floral designs, etc.?

A better grasp of abstract expression is definitely imperative for analyzing Islamic art in general, and Persianate painting in particular.

*INADEQUATE CONCEPTS FOR THE DESCRIPTION OF ISLAMIC ART*

Another major conceptual inaccuracy consists in describing idealistic, symbolic, and stylized figurative representations with analytical concepts such as “formalism,” “mannerism,” “convention,” or “caricature.” For example, one may find the term “Shirazi mannerism” applied to the recurrent modular pattern of figures popping out from behind rocks and buildings in the fifteenth-century miniatures produced in the city of Shiraz<sup>77</sup> (Figs. 18, 19). This terminology implies that the repetition of this iconography is a gratuitous redundancy, a pure stylistic effect. No inquiry into the aesthetic system of these images corroborates that these figurative elements do not participate in the object’s meaning production more implicatively.<sup>78</sup> Usually, these abstractive or minimalist paintings and forms—deemed formal, mannerist, or caricature-like—are negatively evaluated in judgmental and subjective terms such as “stiff,” “dry,” “cold,” “artificial,” or “exaggerated,” in contrast with their opposite, “charming,” “warm,” “elegant,” and so on. This lexicon of weak analytical reach only reflects taste and affect.<sup>79</sup> Suffused here and there with Eurocentric undertones, it punctuates for example the essays in *The Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art and Architecture*.<sup>80</sup>

Shahjahani painting is again the target of this woefully archaic manner of talking about abstract or two-dimensional art: “Although these floral borders are among the most charming work of the seventeenth-century Mughal studio, they become increasingly stiff and formal.”<sup>81</sup> The “analysis” further judges these artifacts, “Technically among the most brilliant of Mughal paintings, with a complete assimilation of European perspective and landscape devices, these static and stylized images lack the warmth of portraits produced earlier under Jahangir.”<sup>82</sup> It can be noticed in addition that technical brilliance is one more time associated with the assimilation of European illusionism. Combined with idealized features, to the authors’ eyes these plastic technicalities produce nothing more than “formal perfection,” repeatedly judged “cold” and “stiff,” “rich but stiff.”<sup>83</sup> Would it be acceptable to talk about strongly stylized African artistic forms or Byzantine icons with the words, “artificial,” “static stylization,” “lifeless,” “lack of warmth,” “formalism,” or “mannerism”? If not, there is no reason to approach the idealistic and graphically oriented forms in Persianate painting differently.

Similarly, would it not be reductionist to foreground politics over other humanistic motives and assert the political agenda as the main parameter of art making in Renaissance Europe or Song China? Yet this line of explanation saturates the academic literature on Mughal painting at the expense of a deeper hermeneutic.

### Reduction of the Mughal Aesthetic Intent to a Political Agenda

Another shortcoming in the historiography of Mughal painting is the one-track characterization of a “Mughal state of mind” regarding art commitment and production as being mainly motivated by political thought and dynastic ideology.<sup>84</sup> Assertions of scholars of reference like Amina Okada or Ebba Koch epitomize this historiographical pattern. For the former, Mughal art was basically meant “to exalt his grandeur and promote his political ambitions,” while the latter insists that “Shah Jahan tried even more consistently than his predecessors to live up to his self-created image, and architecture, art, poetry, historiography and court life during his reign all served to manifest the imperial ideal.”<sup>85</sup> Not only could this standard argument apply just as well to any princely culture or art produced under the patronage of a powerful institution be it the Church, the guilds, the Pope, the court of Louis XIV, Tamerlane, or the tsar of Russia, its overemphasis delivers a reductionist presentation of the Mughal aesthetic consciousness by problematically downplaying the other humanistic values and underpinnings of spiritual, aesthetic, and philosophical order in the Mughal artistic practice and intellectual life.<sup>86</sup> Mughal thought indisputably covered a no less broad spectrum of humanistic topics than Renaissance humanism, for example. Therefore, although the representation of the state and its leader plainly constitutes an important aspect of the Mughal aesthetic intent, one should not lose sight of the fundamental fact that “the ‘inner meanings’ of [the Mughal] works of art—the phrase, frequently cited by Koch, is Abu’l-Fazl’s—do not all reside in concealed references to political ideology.”<sup>87</sup>

This overpoliticized academic narrative also subliminally perpetuates some old “Orientalistic” misconceptions, which need to be deconstructed. It projects onto the Mughal patron the Eurocentric mythic image of the megalomaniac “Oriental” monarch who happened to have stimulated artistic creation through the pathological path of his obsession with power. By inference, it also disquietingly suggests that unlike their European analogues, overall the Mughal artists did not possess enough genius to overcome the patrons’ political instrumentalization of artistic activity and surpass a simple realization of the patron’s ambitious desires. Amina Okada thus wrote, “The emperor’s tastes and wishes determined all artistic productions and the monarch patron imposed his views and favorite subjects on artists, who in return received the Grand Mughal’s favor and protection.”<sup>88</sup> According to this logic, any deviation from the pictorial mainstream dedicated to the expression of state ideology is presented as a rare tour de force. More particularly, many studies on Shahjahani painting contend that the masterful pictorial illusionism of the period signifies an aesthetic rebellion against the “official art” characterized by “formalism,” embedded in the “stiff,” “conventional,”

and “schematic linear arrangements”—that is, the abstract and geometric designs.<sup>89</sup> For example, in contrast with these belittling descriptions of mainly two-dimensional figurations, Ebba Koch lauds the highly naturalistic painting *Darah-Shikoh Hunting Nilgais* by one of the court masters whose work is aesthetically closest to European art:

The free naturalistic mode of the wooded landscape absorbs and transforms the narrative of the hunt, the hierarchically correct figures, psychological portraiture, and intimately studied nature—all typical concerns of the period—into a masterly synthesis full of tension and expressive power. But it was to be only a brief moment in Indian painting created by a master artist’s ingenious response to the specific interests of his patrons.<sup>90</sup> (Fig. 8)

Although illusionist techniques achieved a peak in skillfulness during Shah Jahan’s period, by no means was the synthesis between imitative and idealistic figurality “a brief moment in Indian painting,” since it already appeared fully operational in Akbari art and consistently continued to be so afterward (Figs. 6, 11–12, 20–21, 34). Also the focus on the patron’s interest as ultimate arbiter of the artistic act feeds this overpoliticization of the art historical discourse and minimizes the painters’ personal aesthetic insights, input, and involvement in the creative process. Finally, the combination of the leveling of Mughal artistic intentions and motivations to a political agenda and a semiotic association of state ideology with the two-dimensional picturing mode amounts to a true disfiguration of the Mughal pictorial oeuvre and its aesthetic values, purposes, and meanings. To retrieve the true significance of politics in Mughal art, the political intent ought not be used as an overarching explanatory argument of the art and instead be approached as a specific theme per se in complex weave with other products of Mughal thought.<sup>91</sup>

Similarly, and also owing to the general neglect of theoretical reflection in this scholarship, the examination of the trope of aesthetic hybridity in early Modern Persianate painting has not stimulated proper conceptual analysis. Hybridity has been mainly approached in the framework of the traditional iconographic-stylistic inquiry. Although the epistemological introduction to hybrid arts in Gauvin Bailey’s book on Jesuit art constitutes an exception of significant usefulness, nevertheless its particular conceptual background sensibly differs from ours, which is not restricted to the Jesuit-local cultural encounter and reaches out to pure aesthetics.<sup>92</sup> The same can be said of the more recent valuable reflections on the effects of cultural intersectionality in material culture in South Asia from the eighth through thirteenth centuries, proposed by Finbarr B. Flood. A redefinition of the trope is consequently necessary in this book to adapt its use for the case study of pictorial aesthetics in the early Mughal Empire.

### Semantics of the Locution “Aesthetic Hybridity”

The word “hybridity” is not very often employed in the historiography on Mughal painting. Preference is given to other terms such as “synthesis,” “symbiosis,” and more particularly “influence” that indifferently designate a process of convergence or transculturalism. But we can no longer be content with the casual use of such semantically variegated terms to describe such variegated phenomena. Above all, the term “influence” generates discomfort as it implies the particular one-way dynamic of an active dominating force over a passive submissive recipient that does not always properly characterize hybridization. Aside from its Eurocentric resonance and the misrepresentation that the misuse of this term may entail in the study of non-Western art, the very diversity of procedures and dynamics of cultural exchange compels one to resort to a more suitable lexicon. And there is no lack of choices in the matter.

In the recent academic literature on global arts and cultures a terminology has proliferated, reflecting the salutary energy of thought placed on the theme of cross-cultural encounter. Alongside “hybridity,” “synthesis,” and “syncretism,” a sample of these new terms includes “cosmopolitanism,” “creolization,” “translation,” “miscegenation,” “intersectionality,” “cross-pollination,” and so on. But when employed for the purpose of a specific study, the availability of this rich vocabulary also imposes a redefinition of these words’ semantic field in accordance to the precise phenomenon they aim to describe and to the precise cultural milieu and historical period in which this phenomenon is supposed to take place. In many art histories as in the historiography of Mughal painting, “syncretism” has been routinely accepted as an equivalent and favored substitute for “hybridity,” too burdened with negative connotations. However, hybridity and syncretism are not exactly synonyms, even though the linguistic nuance that differentiates them from each other and from other cognate notions is by no means self-evident; it actually calls for a personalized conceptual reframing based on goal, opinion, and choice.<sup>93</sup>

#### *HYBRIDITY AS GENERIC TROPE*

In the present book, hybridity has been purposely chosen as the chief concept over syncretism and is to be understood in its simplest, generic, etymologic form. More precisely, here “hybridity” designates the condition of being made up of elements from diverse sources, which any entity natural or cultural may present. By extension, “aesthetic hybridity” indicates that the condition or state of being hybrid concerns artistic objects whose perceptual components conspicuously pertain to traditions of different origins and affiliations. By virtue of this generic definition the term “hybridity” enunciates the condition

observed but does not describe it, and that is exactly what is wanted, to avoid further semantic determination and keep an optimal neutrality of meaning. The purpose of this neutrality consists in letting the other less general terms perform appropriately their semantic task when it comes to commenting on a particular instance of hybridity in a given context.

Unlike hybridity, “syncretism” describes and comments inasmuch as it specifies the cohering or binding nature of the relationship between the hybrid entity’s diverse components. In detail, this relationship relies on an organizing principle, the syncretistic principle that binds these components together and reshapes them into a more or less coherent whole. By introducing this particular notion of a binding linkage, syncretism narrows and refines the generic semantic definition attributed to its co-nominal, hybridity. In other words, syncretism not only designates the hybrid condition but also pinpoints a singular condition of this general condition. By the same token, the locution “aesthetic syncretism” implies that a processing or transformational conjunction of the hybrid elements lends the artwork a certain unified character, whereas the term “aesthetic hybridity” only serves the prosaic function of naming an overall state of affairs.<sup>94</sup> According to this semantic acceptance, it is this operatory mode of homogenizing the heterogeneous that justifies the categorization of syncretism in a distinct subcategory of the trope of hybridity, and not as its equivalent.

One might argue that hybridization automatically engenders syncretism and that the latter only specifies the traits immanent to hybridity, so that engaging in linguistic speculations and tedious categorizations seems a bit sterile. But as far as the art historian or critic is concerned, such an objection is not sustainable. Hybridization does not necessarily produce syncretism that itself is not the only form of hybridity. There exists another hybridizing modality that does not implicate the organizing process of homogenizing or blending the heterogeneous and that, on the contrary, keeps intact or quasi-intact the disjunctive pluralistic quality of the hybrid composition. This modality consists of the non-transformational or quasi-non-transformational hybridizing practice of eclecticism. The latter juxtaposes and compiles variegated elements without establishing a specific linkage other than coexistence, thereby preserving their differences intact or quasi-intact. Juxtaposition thus produces a disjunctive hybridity as opposed to a conjunctive hybridity in which the process of conjunction joins and reconfigures the hybrid elements in a syncretistic arrangement.

#### *THE DELEUZIAN MODEL OF SYNTHESIS*

Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy of difference, in particular his “method of constructing convergent series,” offers an invaluable tool to properly segregate these attributes of structure of the trope of hybridity, which allows

it to produce a wide array of forms and possibilities of artistic synthesis.<sup>95</sup> At the most general level, that is, in setting aside its psychoanalytical, political, and socio-philosophical applications, the Deleuzian method rests upon the trinary conceptual schema of the “disjunctive synthesis” (*synthèse disjonctive*), “conjunctive synthesis” (*synthèse conjonctive*), and “connective synthesis” (*synthèse connective*). For this inquiry in the domain of applied aesthetics, this scheme is reduced to the binary “conjunctive versus disjunctive synthesis” as the conjunctive synthesis is considered fundamentally connective. Thus in art, the conjunctive synthesis corresponds to the syncretistic hybridity just described. It develops itself along the axis of contiguity and convergence “and ... and ...,” as opposed to the disjunctive synthesis corresponding to the hybrid collection of conspicuously heteroclitic elements that develops along the axis of separateness and divergence “either ... or ... or ... .” In artistic terminology “eclecticism,” sometimes designated with the word “patchwork,” precisely denominates the production of such visibly differentiated and openly disjunctive hybrid constructs.

#### *EXTREME DIFFERENCES: ECLECTICISM*

Eclecticism can be intentional or unintentional. While the gathering of heterogeneous material is the necessary precondition prior to any hybridization, the eclectic feature may be actively sought after as a form of art of its own that deliberately invests in the rhetorical power and aesthetic values of phenomenal difference and foreignness. Book art in pre-Modern Sultanate India (1200–early 1500) exemplifies this particular branch of hybridism, as does Victorian eclectic art, to offer an example outside the cultural sphere of Islam<sup>96</sup> (Figs. 15–16, 22–7).

As to unintentional eclecticism, it can be signified by the term “pastiche.” This term appears occasionally in the historiography of Mughal painting and other art histories, most of the time colored with negative undertones. Sometimes it even conveys the notion of failure owing to the undefined or ill-defined perceptual properties of the pastiche effect, not totally syncretistic but not frankly eclectic either. Employed in this derogatory sense, “pastiche” designates a botched, loose, or unsuccessful attempt at conjunctive synthesis. However, it can also be used more neutrally to underscore the experimental nature of certain hybridizing strategies as opposed to more elaborate and established practices of hybridization. The unplanned, and sometimes unwanted, “disjunctiveness” of some pastiche configurations may consequently point to a variety of creative activities, from research, improvisation, and bricolage to immature artistry. Clearly, the values and terms of appreciation of the pastiche effect are subjective, variable, and culturally determined.<sup>97</sup>

To recapitulate, not everything hybrid proceeds from the same mode of hybridization, therefore hybridity can take on diverse artistic forms and reveal different intentions and habits determined by circumstance and context. Characterized by the explanatory nuances they convey, the locutions “syncretism,” “eclecticism,” “pastiche,” and their multiple synonyms and derived words allow differentiating the variegated instances and modalities of occurrence of the transcultural phenomenon. In contradistinction, hybridity is mute about the hybridizing mode itself, either disjunctive or conjunctive, thus constituting the stable common denominator of all these concepts. By relying on this term’s double linguistic property of neutrality and inclusivity, positing any presupposition or foregrounding any presumption that could a priori imply or subjectively lead the investigation of aesthetic hybridity in Mughal painting in any particular direction is avoided.

### **Semiotics of the Cultural Concept of Hybridity**

Neutrality, however, is certainly not a defining feature of hybridity if the term “hybridity” is considered in light of its cultural history. Hybridity is a heavily connoted concept that has been used and sometimes abused in different ways in postcolonial and postmodern thought, and more recently in some tenets of cultural criticism.<sup>98</sup> This weighty political-historical-cultural legacy has hijacked the trope so that it has become almost impossible to use it without prompting resonances and echoes of these intellectual currents regardless of their relevance in a given context. Significantly, for example, in his inquiry on Indo-Muslim material culture in the “Medieval” period, Finbarr B. Flood expressed reluctance to refer to hybridity, although he did not discard the concept for practical reasons. He writes, “Metaphors of hybridity presuppose (if not produce) ‘pure’ original or parent cultures, betraying ... their roots in nineteenth-century scientific discourses on race, within which culture was a sign or symptom and cultural mixing (like racial miscegenation) was generally frowned on as uneasy, unnatural, and unstable state of affairs.”<sup>99</sup>

#### *THE WEIGHT OF POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM*

Clearly, in the study of non-Western art and culture, the association of hybridity with the colonial trauma, Eurocentrism, and the madness of racial ideology constitute de facto a heavy impediment not only to the use of the concept but also to grasping its significance and semiotic value in cultural contexts in which history has not been marked by European colonialism. If prior to postmodernism and postcolonial criticism, particularly in its

appropriation by Homi Bhabha, hybridity was a flexible and usable trope, afterwards it was cornered in anti-imperialist and antiracist discourses, and any redeeming anti-difference narratives to the extent that it became taboo.<sup>100</sup>

Consequently, although hybridity is a condition affecting many cultural realms and objects that were not necessarily affected by imperialist and racist brutalities, this taboo has influenced the writing on art and visual culture in general. When it is not reluctantly retained as by Flood, or simply replaced by other concepts considered more neutral such as syncretism, cosmopolitanism, or convergence, the use of this stigmatized word automatically calls for the support of an apparatus of epistemological and ethical justifications in order to ward off any possible undesirable analogies. Yet, as previously noted, the terminological substitutes for hybridity do not always signify exactly the same thing. Furthermore, although this term appears less frequently used outside the realm of postcolonial criticism and its affiliated branches, paradoxically the very realities it designates beyond the spatiotemporalities concerned with colonial traumas are talked about more than ever, with much intellectual enthusiasm. Among newly studied instances of hybridity, some result from traumatic events, but many others reveal more serene and joyful circumstances of hybridization due to positive attitudes such as interest for alterity, cultural openness, permeability to external influxes, or creative appropriation of alien traditions.<sup>101</sup> Certain forms of artistic hybridism in European art such as *Japonism* in the Modern period are an example of this. This “happy” hybridism justifies relieving the topic of hybridity from its burden of “barbaric” significances, to borrow one of Bhabha’s strong adjectives.<sup>102</sup>

As its title indicates, this book categorically refutes the idea that hybridity was “once a critical term that has lost its efficacy.”<sup>103</sup> My choice of this word shows my intent to retrieve its original meaning before it had become the recipient of these appropriations as legitimate as they are, and to rehabilitate its epistemological legitimacy by freeing it from bondage to postcolonial and postmodern thought. However, to rehabilitate the trope of hybridity the parameters of its knowledge again necessitate a reconceptualization that would integrate the opposite notion of “the relatively or quasi-non-hybrid.”

#### *NECESSITY OF DEFINING THE “NON-HYBRID”*

A desire to prevent a resurgence of the myth of purity and other unsustainable topoi of cultural superiority has entailed an inconvenient lack: that of a counter notion to hybridity. This trope and cognate concepts have been implicitly or explicitly denied the ability to be cast against an opposite that I have thus termed in the simplest way possible, the relatively or quasi “non-hybrid.”

The sole idea that something may not be relatively or negligibly hybrid has become unthinkable, unnamable, or at best incommensurably suspicious. Problematically, there has been no reinvention of a positive non-hybrid or quasi-non-hybrid that could offer a sane alternative to the fascist “pure,” the colonial “indigenous,” or even the anthropological notion of the “native” to designate the “original local” that is less painful and still routinely used, but that nevertheless conjures the violence of invasion and the history of Eurocentrism.<sup>104</sup> If the possibility of a more serene “quasi-non-hybrid” happens to be tacitly accepted or envisaged, it remains a nebulousness deprived of a proper ontological status. In a more extreme approach, a certain trend of the critique of difference and alterity squarely eliminates the very thought of it in transforming hybridity and the transcultural into a property shared by all, everybody, and everywhere.<sup>105</sup> Jean Baudrillard coined the term “implosion”—“the reduction of difference to absolute indifference, equivalence, interchangeability”—which has leveled these specifying notions to sweeping generalizations and disquieting nihilations.<sup>106</sup> An illustration of this current of thought is Sheldon Pollock’s positing transculturation as “a misnomer, since it is the real and permanent condition of all cultural life”; for “there exist no cultural agents who are not always-already transcultured.”<sup>107</sup>

Based on this particular understanding of the transcultural phenomenon, a generalized status quo has been established according to which every cultural entity ought to be thought of as following this model of discourse, while breaking this rule may entail being accused of “cultural racism.”<sup>108</sup> True, everything is fundamentally trans-cross-intercultural, and this truth had to be stressed in moments of danger and doubt. However, a dead end looms beyond the truthfulness of this postulate turned quasi-moral claim of communalist ideology. As has been acknowledged in a self-deconstructive syllogism, “if everything is syncretistic, nothing is syncretistic and the term loses its power to describe.”<sup>109</sup> This denial or its corollary, the indetermination of the relatively non-hybrid, indeed erases the cognitive status of hybridity as a distinctive cultural sign springing from a quite distinctive process, which is to gather the different, the heterogeneous, the alien, and the borrowed *not per se but in opposition* to sameness, the homogeneous, the local, the original, the primal, the inside, and so on.

All this means that in order to constitute a viable trope, hybridity has to be constructed against a counter-concept of some sort without which any locution designating this condition simply ceases to make sense. Otherwise termed, if one accepts this unsettling thought canceling, silencing, or ignoring the “quasi-non-hybrid,” one basically effects the absurd gesture of emptying a word and replacing the original concept of hybridity or even that of syncretism with a fake senseless one—namely, a distinguishing concept of hybridness that distinguishes the undistinguishable since everything is similarly hybrid!

Worse, such an acceptance nurtures yet another taboo I would call “the taboo of the (quasi) non-hybrid,” that is, the taboo of everything that mostly grows within a given cultural milieu with limited interferences from the outside.

This stifling attitude not only places unnecessary restrictions on the analysis of the theme of hybridness but also continues to make hybridity the trigger of ideological projections. While hybridity has been the subject of a justified rejection and repulsion during certain infamous episodes of history, it seems that now it has become not less subjectively and reductively the sign of supreme cultural accomplishment. And, ultimately, what could a hybrid art or culture be without a counterproduct, a complementary opposite enabling the formation of the infinite variation of the hybrid condition, and why is there so much discussion of hybridity if it is a chimera, a mind-invented fallacy?

To lift this untenable status quo and recover hybridity’s depth of meaning, an unashamed recognition of the relatively non-hybrid is imperative. Hybridity and non-hybridity have to be given back visibility, integrity, and dignity, without being conceptualized with a dichotomic binary logic without nuance. On the contrary, the purpose of retrieving the notion of non-hybridity is to acknowledge the nuance, multiplicity, and conjugation of forms of hybridism at play in the productive dynamic of the indigenous/exogenous interface. Cleansed of the abhorred segregationist semantic, the non-hybrid is perfectly conceivable as a condition of relative homogeneity in a context of relative indigenesness, in contradistinction to the frank cosmopolitanism characterizing societies or cultural frameworks particularly affected or exposed to exogenous influxes and other processes of transculturation. Thus understood, the hybrid and the non-hybrid can form a flexible and versatile duality of complementarities integrating tacitly the subtle notion of the hybrid as part of “non-hybridness.”

In this revised approach to the concept of hybridity as a binomial, the hybrid is interchangeable with the non-hybrid depending on the evolution and shifts of history. In the duration, the hybrid may develop into a non-hybrid inasmuch as the exogenous and heterogeneous elements become fully incorporated, internalized, and processed into a single entity. To define as accurately as possible any artistic or cultural system as hybrid or relatively non-hybrid, what must be determined is whether its level of hybridness is apparent and strongly meaningful—that is, whether its components’ qualities of foreignness and difference can be immediately apprehended as such and appear phenomenologically operational in an active dynamical interface. The example of Victorian hybrid art can be repeated here. But closer to this book, both Persian and Mughal sixteenth-century painting may also demonstrate the validity of this duality and its fundamental hermeneutic usefulness in the inquiry on Persianate pictorial art.

*A CASE OF BINARY HYBRID/NON-HYBRID: SIXTEENTH-CENTURY SAFAVID AND MUGHAL PAINTING*

Evidently, the wide range of artistic traditions displayed by Mughal artifacts in the sixteenth century makes them a perfect fit for the category of hybrid art. This art is called hybrid or syncretistic because it is so conspicuous in comparison with more homogeneous or less cross-cultural contemporary productions within the Persianate pictorial spectrum (Figs. 11–12, 20–21). In particular, the early Modern Mughal paintings contrast with their Persian contemporaries as those are clearly modeled upon the century-old Turkic-Mongol-Persian aesthetic logic that forms a solidly cemented whole despite the variegated regional schools and the presence of Chinese elements<sup>110</sup> (Figs. 28–9, 37–8). Calling this Persian art “hybrid” would sound awkward if not incorrect, as in this period Chinese iconography was fully absorbed in the Persian grammar and so an integral part of it. The quality of hybridness that was indeed conspicuous under variegated aspects in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, yielded in the early sixteenth century to a pictorial production that no longer qualifies for the hybrid art category.<sup>111</sup> Early Safavid painting forms a homogeneous aesthetic singularity.

Simply pointing and describing these observable features necessitates proper wording. The binomial of the hybrid-(quasi)-non-hybrid, disengaged from all its past ideologies and resonances, meets this requirement and constitutes the indispensable presupposition to the present investigation of aesthetic hybridity in Mughal painting. To confirm the indispensability of this binomial for properly construing hybridity, I will offer another example purposely taken from a radically different cultural sphere in which the non-hybrid unquestionably has a semantic function of great importance.

*THE NON-HYBRID AS TOOL OF NEGOTIATION BETWEEN TRANSCULTURALISM AND INTRACULTURALISM*

Those interested in Chinese contemporary art are aware of the practice of intentional hybridity that some artists manipulate with the utmost creative potency. Among other goals, these artists purposely borrow Western artistic formulas as a gesture of rebellion or challenge to the authoritative forces of the Chinese establishment, which has been trying to stifle this creative strategy and other artistic forms, which it considers as violations of supreme national art, symptoms of cultural invasion from the West, or forms of intolerable political subversion. In this context of transnational/intercultural tension, Ai Weiwei’s famous photographs of Weiwei dropping a Han dynasty jar offers, it seems to me, a powerful example of the hermeneutic potency of the hybrid and non-hybrid conceptual paradigm.<sup>112</sup>

Among the multiple meanings it conveys, the artist's painful destruction of a priceless national treasure may symbolize a liberating breakup with a too-weighty Chinese artistic past that is forcibly imposed as an inviolable norm. While the Han piece represents a foundational episode of Chinese history essential to the official Chinese national-cultural narrative, it also embodies the glorious "pure" and "authentic" art and culture of ancient China. Therefore, the Han artifact constitutes a sanctified, original non-hybrid, instrumental to the political-cultural rhetoric of Ai Weiwei's photographs. Through his creative-destructive act, he proclaims his double identity as a Chinese national and global creator, while asserting his freedom of expression on the artistic and political levels. Artists criminalized by the Chinese establishment like Weiwei symbolically and provocatively threaten the Chinese cultural identity, as conceived by Chinese authorities, by means of artistic modes of expressions and techniques originally rooted in the history of Western art. Thus, in the signifying system of Weiwei's artwork, the aesthetic duality of the hybrid and non-hybrid provides a deconstructive tool to fight against this oppressive political-cultural binary scheme of China versus the West.

This example of contemporary art, together with the case of early Modern Safavid and Mughal painting, should suffice to substantiate the claim that the dual conceptual model hybrid/non-hybrid expresses the reality of vital forces at work in processes of artistic construction, and as such provides a valuable hermeneutic device for the examination of cultural intersectionality in Mughal pictorial aesthetics.

### **Contextual Parameters of the Study of Mughal Pictorial Hybridity**

The anti-imperialist and postcolonial critiques form a problematic legacy for the study of hybridity in the specific context of precolonial Mughal India, as the latter is not directly concerned with their anxieties, deconstructions, and predicaments. The generally stable and prosperous Mughal State of this precolonial period interacted with various foreign agencies present on the subcontinent and was affected by cross-cultural transactions. But its sovereignty was not threatened during these times. Therefore, aesthetic hybridity in early Mughal painting must be analyzed using different parameters, in particular non-violent parameters, excluding the forms of external dominance and subordination described by postcolonial criticism. By extension, discourses about hybrid arts in Latin America contemporary to the Mughals are inapplicable and non-transferable to the Mughal artistic context. This is not to say that Mughal India was an island of peace and quiet in a world in turmoil, as they were equally implicated in political struggles, tensions, and games of power.<sup>113</sup> But, crucially, in the period that concerns us

the Mughals' political solidity enabled them to control their relationship with the "Other" in these "contact events," whatever the alien's agenda.<sup>114</sup>

In the sixteenth century, the Jesuits came to the Mughal court as guests upon their hosts' invitation.<sup>115</sup> The nature of the missionaries' agenda was by no means different from that of their peers in other parts of the globe, but whatever their perception of their hosts and their strategies to achieve Catholic indoctrination, within the narrow limits of their field of action in Mughal territory, they were not in a position to impose themselves or intervene compulsorily. Unlike more complex situations in other lands targeted by the Society of Jesus, in Mughal India the reception of the Catholic cultural influx was free of influence in the sense previously defined. It was based on the hosts' genuine desire to know, a full choice to accept and serenely appreciate this influx, which was strongly sustained by aesthetic-conceptual affinities between the European and the Mughal artistic vision, affinities examined in detail in the last chapter.<sup>116</sup> Desire and curiosity were the main stimuli and fundamental conditions of the introduction of Jesuit culture at the precolonial Mughal court that concerns this book. In this respect, both the nature of the encounter and its products are fundamentally distinct from those resulting from the Jesuit missions in Mexico or Peru, for instance. Therefore, the Mughal "intentional hybridity" with European art—namely, the deliberate appropriation of European and Christian forms—has nothing to do with the more forceful (though no less creative) process sometimes called artistic "acculturation" that took place elsewhere in the same period.

#### *HYBRIDITY AS IPSEITIC SIGN OF MUGHAL PAINTING*

Acculturation does not apply to Mughal art as this process usually consists of the merging of two cultures, stemming from an unbalanced and highly transformational indigenous/exogenous interface, entailing a great deal of loss and mutation, if not the disappearance of the local tradition.<sup>117</sup> In contrast with the more deeply altering artistic hybridizations of other Jesuit missions' areas, the precolonial Mughal encounter with *arte sacra* was a totally winning positive, and free construction guided by the Mughal inclination for acquiring and learning everything deemed meaningful, useful, and relevant whether from inside or outside the Mughal cultural space.

Another significant difference distinguishing the early Mughal Empire from other cultures targeted by the Jesuit agenda is that the Mughal encounter with the art of the Counter-Reformation was but one among several cross-cultural contacts that formed "Mughal painting." By no means was the Jesuit encounter the most influential, as Gauvin Bailey has suggested. These multiple contacts generated multiple processes of hybridization in a complex unfolding of different sequences I playfully dub "hybrid hybridism." This phenomenon, plainly visible in the artifacts' iconography, has been well evidenced in

the literature. However, its critical interpretation remains unsatisfactory because, primarily, it has been wrongly based upon the idea that Mughal painting essentially derives from the Persian model or is fundamentally, ontologically a mutative form of Persian miniature. But as will be shown in the remaining chapters, early Mughal painting was not merely an Indianized and Europeanized avatar of Persian book art. Instead, it resulted from the intersection of strongly distinct aesthetic logics and philosophies—namely, those of Iran, India, and Europe, although the latter had much less weight.

This means that there is no such thing as Mughal painting *before* and *outside* this multidirectional series of cross-artistic encounters in early Mughal history. The strategies and techniques of picturing that the Mughals manipulated to produce Mughal images were all non-Mughal—“Mughal” being precisely understood here as distinctively “Indo-Mughal” and not equivalent with “Timurid” as in the historical discourse.<sup>118</sup> By inference, there is no such thing as a “Mughal non-hybrid art” until the reign of Shah Jahan when hybridity evolved into a non-hybrid through the internalization of hybridness as an immanent component of Mughal pictorial aesthetics and ipseity.

Some might object to the originality or uniqueness of this Mughal art’s formative history on the premise that the beginnings of Persian painting also featured the visual concept of hybridity. However, the determining distinction between aesthetic and iconographic hybridity invalidates such an objection. As noted above, the Persian image-makers before the Safavid era indeed drew from a pluralistic grammar, but the aesthetic logic they implemented in using it originates from a Persian intracultural conception of the image and its medium, the book. For example, in Ilkhanid and Jalayirid manuscripts the Chinese and Europeanizing motifs fully subscribe to the Persian pictorial order (discussed in Chapters 3 and 4) and do not change the structure of aesthetic metaphysics conjured up in the illustrations’ imagistic space. This is what scholars imply when they signal the interpretation these borrowed foreign elements have been through in the Persian pictorial context, with intuitive assertions along these lines, “there is nothing Chinese in these Chinese elements of Persian painting” or “in Timurid drawings the Chinese iconography definitely appears Timurid.” In contrast, in early Mughal painting not only is the repertoire hybrid, but so is its aesthetic system, built upon the confluence of different imagistic logics and visions.

To conclude with a last supporting clarification, let us briefly compare the Akbari pictorial hybridity to hybrid products such as, say, coeval Christianized painting from China. In using the conceptual matrix hybrid/non-hybrid, one can easily discern in this art the Chinese “non-hybrid” or the local pre-hybridization manner. The elements of the original pictorial idiom that were retained and those that were discarded to adopt and adapt the foreign formulas usually appear in limpid contradistinction with one another. But if one attempts to apply this same conceptual matrix to early

Mughal painting to similarly decode the hybrid articulation, one will find it impossible to identify a pre-hybridization Indian Mughal aesthetic that could be specified as “a non-hybrid Indo-Mughal” analogous to the Chinese, Mexican, or Japanese picturing mode that preexisted the hybrid operation. Consequently, to study early Mughal painting from the critical and aesthetic point of view, remembering that “artistic Mughalness” does not exist outside hybridity is requisite.

## Notes

- 1 I consider “Persianate” and “Iranicate” equivalent terms.
- 2 The most recent work in this direction is David Roxburgh’s article published in *Res* in 2003, “Micrographia: Toward a Visual Logic of Persianate Painting.” Certainly interesting as an attempt to better understand Persian painting, this short essay is however much too weak. Just a few remarks will make the point. The use of the concept of “monoscenic composition” does not suit Persian images, which are inherently multilayered, often fragmented in multiple individual sub-scenes, breakable or broken in different pieces, or expandable or expanded with extensions toward different directions. Also Roxburgh wrongly states that “there is no indeterminacy” (28) to describe forms that are intentionally ambiguous, ambivalent, hidden, potential, metamorphic, transformational, or unfinished, in sum forms fully playing with aesthetic indeterminacy. A detailed analysis of these characteristics of Persian painting is provided in Chapter 4.
- 3 David Roxburgh’s book provides an exhaustive bibliography on Persian painting up to the Modern period. Since its publication in 2005, the scholarship on this art did not change in terms of methodology. It is still based on textual, historical, stylistic, and iconographic interpretations. In other respects, it is important to note that, rather neglected until recently, Modern and contemporary Persian painting is getting significantly more attention.
- 4 David Roxburgh uses the expression “shape of history” in *The Persian Album, 1400–1600*, 273. On the function of the preface, see Roxburgh’s *Prefacing the Image* and “Kamal al-Din Bihzad and Authorship in Persianate Painting.”
- 5 *The Persian Album, 1400–1600*, 13 and 21, and see also part 1. Finbarr B. Flood equally stresses this suspicion of objects in “Things and Texts,” *Objects of Translation*, 9–12.
- 6 David J. Roxburgh provides sensitive and useful insights on the folios’ forms and patterns in *The Persian Album, 1400–1600*, 171–5, 209–20, and 261–72. See also Roxburgh’s “The Aesthetics of Aggregation: Persian Anthologies of the Fifteenth Century,” in *Islamic Art and Literature*, ed. Oleg Grabar and Cynthia Robinson (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2001), 119–42. Regarding Oleg Grabar’s works see in particular “Toward an Aesthetic of Persian Painting,” in *Mostly Miniatures, An Introduction to Persian Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Oleg Grabar and Mika Natif, “Two Safavid Paintings: An Essay in Interpretation,” *Muqarnas* 18 (2001): 173–202.
- 7 The term “deconstructivist” refers to the well-known trend of “deconstructivist

architecture” in the 1980s. Many Persian pictorial configurations present striking similarities with, for example, Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, or Daniel Libeskind’s deconstructivist drawings characterized by dislocation and fragmentation of the imagistic construct, and built upon autonomous units put together in an apparent discontinuous arrangement. While the logic of functionality and stability is challenged in utopian deconstructivist architectural works, so, often, is the harmonious continuum of discourse, narration, and form construction in Persian book art. See also the analysis in Chapter 4. Regarding the concept of *aporia*, I clearly see it at work in Persian pictorial art. This could be a topic for future aesthetic research, borrowing the model of methodology used in *Subject as Aporia in Early Modern Art*, ed. Alexander Nagel (Farnham, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).

- 8 Roxburgh resorts to this type of rhetoric when he comes across one of these pieces with abstract qualities difficult to fit into the main art historical narrative, in *The Persian Album, 1400–1600*, 266 or 271–2.
- 9 This feature is noted of the preface in Chapter 1. For example, Roxburgh noted that, “Dust Muhammad’s reference to decorating (*tazyin*) is as oblique as his statement about ordering and arranging it.” In *The Persian Album, 1400–1600*, 269. See also in the latter, “Parameters and Methods of Study,” 20–21, “Images of the Safavid Album, the Audience of Albums and the Benefits of Art,” 188–96.
- 10 See Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Evidences of Intention,” in *Aesthetics*, 26–7. For the definition and fundamental distinction between the different categories of intention, practice, accomplishment, perception, and response, see in *Aesthetics* the section “phenomenal Objectivity,” 34–43, and chapter II, “The Categories of Critical Analysis.” It should be noted that by the term “phenomenal” Beardsley means qualities phenomenologically defined. The distinction between phenomenalism and phenomenology is irrelevant here. For a concise description of these categories, see “Phenomenalism” and “Phenomenology,” in the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 576–9.
- 11 See Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Evidences of Intention,” in *Aesthetics*, 18–21.
- 12 Roxburgh refers in particular to Dust Muhammad’s preface, “the Bahram Mirza album of 1544–45 may have been concept-driven, but there was also room for freedom of interpretation.” In *The Persian Album, 1400–1600*, 273.
- 13 By no means does this imply that examining the Persian album holistically is a wrong approach. This approach very successfully fulfilled its purpose. My point is simply that to further the study of Persian painting, the methodology is to be rethought and redesigned in accordance with new directions of study.
- 14 See the illustrations of these Chinese items and their analysis by Roxburgh in *The Persian Album, 1400–1600*, 269–72. The astonishing specimen illustrated in figure 148 is, to me, a clear example of aesthetic *aporia*, with its mixtures of ruptures, junctures, and the rotated depiction of a bird that is at once sitting on a branch and lying down on the border’s frame. This plastic arrangement is a strong cognitive stimulator, much more significant than a richly decorated surface, as Roxburgh sates for want of a better explanation. “Reformatting amplified the effect of richly painted surfaces by creating greater color density, and intervals of blank support, so critical to the original formulation of the work,

were dispensed with. Such manipulations often altered the iconography." In *The Persian Album, 1400–1600*, 271.

- 15 The phenomenon of inter pictoriality or "intervisuality" echoes the analogous phenomenon of intertextuality in Persian literature by which stories from different narratives are interrelated through the repetition, allusion, or reference to the same themes from one text to another. Intertextuality is logically reflected or transposed in the illustration of these texts in the art of books and albums. Inter pictoriality and intertextuality may thus occur in conjunction in manuscripts or albums. Intertextuality has been discussed by different scholars, among them David Roxburgh, in *Prefacing the Image*, 110–12; Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Topkapi Scroll*, 205–7; and Gregory Minissale, *Images of Thought*, 131–3.
- 16 This plastic alteration is naturally perceived differently according to the cultural determinism characterizing the viewer's mind.
- 17 Roxburgh discusses this process of reformatting pictures in *The Persian Album, 1400–1600*, 271–72.
- 18 Monica Juneja, review of *Interpreting Mughal Painting: Essays on Art, Society and Culture* by Som Prakash Verma, "Book Review: Perspectives of Mughal Art," *Book Review India* XXXIV, 4 (April 2010), [www.thebookreviewindia.org/reviewers/monica-juneja/231.html](http://www.thebookreviewindia.org/reviewers/monica-juneja/231.html).
- 19 Gerardo Mosquera, "The Marco Polo Syndrome: Some Problems around Art and Eurocentrism," in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, 218.
- 20 On the politico-cultural topic of pan-Asianism, see "Asia Redux: Conceptualizing a Region for Our Times," *Journal of Asian Studies* 69, 4 (November 2010). About "pan-Indianism," I am aware of the connotations this expression may convey, but it seems to me that it describes well in this book this form of ideology antagonizing India against Iran as two major competing cultural poles in Asia.
- 21 It was not until the seventeenth century that Mughal artistic culture had a significant impact on European art. For the cultural history of early Modern India, see the latest comprehensive work of Muzzafar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics*.
- 22 To his credit are also a few articles inclined toward critical reflection, with mixed results despite promising titles: Gregory Minissale, "The Synthesis of European and Mughal Art in the Emperor's Akbar's *Khamsa* of Nizami," *Asianart.com/articles*, October 13, 2000; "Seeing Eye-to-Eye with Mughal Miniatures: Some Observations on the Outward Gazing Figure in Mughal Art," *Marg* 58, 3 (2007): 40–49; and "The Dynamics of the Gaze in Mughal Painting," *Marg* 58, 2 (2007): 50–59.
- 23 When I read this book for the first time, I was so enthusiastic about its innovative approach that I did not yet see its flaws. This is reflected in my review of Gregory Minissale, *Images of Thought: Visuality in Islamic India, 1550–1750* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006), in *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 125 (July 2009): 319–22. I must say, however, that my opinion changed quite dramatically in my second reading, although this book has been a great stimulus for my own work.

- 24 This quotation is an excerpt from an anonymous author's unpublished report. Other examples include Amina Okada, who wrote, "... Basawan *refused* to reconstruct with scrupulous fidelity the iconography and subject matter ... of a European image." In *Master Artists of the Imperial Mughal Court*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1991), 11; and Gülru Necipoğlu, who contends, "Despite its increasing realism the Mughal visual idiom was still bound to a conventional modal system of aesthetics," in *The Topkapi Scroll*, 219, and quoted by Gregory Minissale in *Images of Thought*, 59.
- 25 Mughal and Indian painting deriving from Mughal models dating from Aurangzeb's reign through the colonial period took another interesting aesthetic turn that deserves an updated critical investigation. This development corresponds to a new, distinct phase of Indian pictorial art, characterized by more abstract tendencies and a return to a slight dominance of two-dimensional forms. But the concept of anti-illusionism seems equally irrelevant in this later period. The process is due rather to a shift of emphasis to graphic and color design.
- 26 Here I refer to Gregory Minissale's exploration of the French postmodern concept of *mise en abyme*, appropriate for the study of this iconography but overused by the author, *Images of Thought*, 230–42.
- 27 Here is a list of Bailey's most important publications for the present study: *The Jesuits and the Arts: 1540–1773*, ed. John W. O'Malley SJ, Gauvin Alexander Bailey, and Giovanni Sale, SJ (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph University Press, 2005); Gauvin A. Bailey, *The Art of The Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); and *Occasional Papers: The Jesuits and the Grand Mogul, Renaissance Art at the Imperial Court of India, 1580–1630* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1998).
- 28 Muzzafar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Frank Disputations: Catholics and Muslims in the Court of Jahangir (1608–11)," 1, note 4.
- 29 Among art historians, Gregory Minissale is the only author to underscore Bailey's Eurocentric inclination, in several endnotes of *Images of Thought*, for example, in note 38, 42, and note 3, 176. In the introduction, Minissale also stresses the Eurocentric aspect of the history of Mughal painting in general.
- 30 *The Art of the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773*, 11.
- 31 Muzzafar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Frank Disputations," 1–2.
- 32 Gauvin A. Bailey, *The Art of the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773*, 4–5.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 3–4.
- 34 Prasenjit Duara, "Asia Redux," 973.
- 35 See Gauvin A. Bailey, part 2, "The Origins of the Partnerships," in *The Art of the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773*.
- 36 This is the title of a talk that the celebrated anti-racism American activist and writer famously gave at the Astor Hotel in New York in 1930. Of course, her response to the question was no.
- 37 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 113.

- 38 Ibid., 113.
- 39 Gauvin A. Bailey, *The Art of the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773*, 34–5.
- 40 Quoted by Alam and Subrahmanyam in “Frank Disputations,” 463.
- 41 Gauvin A. Bailey, *The Art of the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773*, 5.
- 42 See the section “The Indigenous Element in Mughal Christian Art,” in *The Art of the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773*, 137–41. But I restrict my criticism to Bailey’s discourse on Mughal painting only, even though his interpretations of Jesuit-related artistic productions in Asia and Latin America have been criticized as well. See part 5, “A Bright Assembly: The Jesuit Mission to Mogor, 1580–1773.” Minissale mentions Marie Timberlake’s work on Andean art, which also questions Bailey’s Eurocentric view of South American material in *Images of Thought*, note 38, 42.
- 43 Naturally, most books on Mughal painting trace the European and Christian sources in the Mughal imagery, but the following study offers a convenient, exhaustive survey-list on the Christian-Mughal production, *Intercultural Encounter in Mughal Miniatures: Mughal-Christian Miniatures*, ed. Khalid Anis Ahmed (Lahore: A National College of Arts Publication, 1995).
- 44 Gauvin A. Bailey, *The Art of the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773*, 4.
- 45 For a fresh approach to the processes of cultural circulation between Asia and Europe in this period, see *Artistic and Cultural Exchanges between Europe and Asia, 1400–1900: Rethinking Markets, Workshops and Collections*, ed. Michael North (Farnham, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011); Charles H. Parker, *Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); *Emissaries in Early Modern Literature and Culture, Mediation, Transmission, Traffic, 1550–1700*, ed. Brinda Charry (Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2009).
- 46 Gauvin A. Bailey, *The Art of the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773*, 4.
- 47 Gauvin A. Bailey, *The Jesuits and the Arts, 1540–1773*, 350.
- 48 Ibid., 28.
- 49 There are other errors in Bailey’s texts besides those mentioned here. Alam and Subrahmanyam report some, in particular a grave linguistic mistake in the translation of an original Portuguese text on Jesuit rhetoric regarding the doctrinal aspect of religious imagery. The two historians propose a plausible translation of this text, “it is a figure of God not because He is [really] like this, but rather so that with this figure we can show some of His attributes,” while Bailey translates it in words that obviously do not make sense, “It is an image of God not only because he looks like this, but also in order to demonstrate some of his attributes using this picture,” in *The Art of the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773*, note 121, 234, quoted and translated in “Frank Disputations,” 481.

- 50 On devotional imagery, see Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies*, and Christiane J. Gruber, *The Ilkhanid Book of Ascension: A Persian-Sunni Devotional Tale* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris and British Institute for Persian Studies, 2010).
- 51 Bailey says, “Unlike Islam, which has virtually no tradition of figurative devotional imagery and could not compete with Hindu iconography effectively, Catholic art possessed undeniable visual potency,” in *Occasional Papers*, 38; and “particularly portraits of prophets such as Solomon or the Queen of Sheba” (the Queen of Sheba is not a prophet in Islam) and “Christian imagery was at Akbar’s tomb ... This gate was in full view of the public, and was the closest Jahangir ever came to commissioning such murals on religious architecture.” In *The Art of the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773*, 114 and 136.
- 52 This blunt statement is noted by Minissale in *Images of Thought*, note 11, 37.
- 53 Gauvin A. Bailey, *The Art of the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773*, 112.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 192.
- 55 See Ebba Koch, “Pietre Dure and Other Artistic Affinities between the Court of the Mughals and That of the Medici,” in *A Mirror of Princes: The Mughals and the Medici*, ed. Dalu Jones (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1987), 30. See also Milo C. Beach, *The New Cambridge History of India, Mughal and Rajput Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Milo C. Beach, Ebba Koch, and Wheeler Thackston, *King of the World: The Padshahnama, an Imperial Mughal Manuscript from the Royal Library, Windsor Castle* (London: Azimuth Edition; Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1997).
- 56 Punam Madhock, “Christian-Islamic Relations in the Court Art of Mughal India,” *International Journal of the Arts in Society* 4, 8 (2010): 67–78, [www.academia.edu/4058969/Christian-Islamic\\_Relations\\_in\\_the\\_Court\\_Art\\_of\\_Mughal\\_Indian](http://www.academia.edu/4058969/Christian-Islamic_Relations_in_the_Court_Art_of_Mughal_Indian).
- 57 Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, 9; see “The Hierarchical Principles of Shah Jahan Painting,” 131–43. And Ebba Koch, *King of the World*, 132. In *Images of Thought*, Minissale rightly pinpoints the Eurocentric interpretations in Koch’s studies.
- 58 Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, 132, 142.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 133, 138. The outdated and out-of-place theme of the artist’s freedom in the early Modern Persianate cultural context is frequent in the scholarship. For example, Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom rely on it to explain the variety of literary episodes illustrated in the art of the book. In this case, however, “Manuscript painters evidently had considerable freedom in the choice of narrative episodes to be illustrated.” In “Narrative Art,” in *The Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art and Architecture*, vol. III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 48. It should be clear that in this period the issue is not the artists’ freedom, but the type and content of rules and conventions artists dealt with.
- 60 Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, 134–5.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 141.
- 62 Ebba Koch quoted in *King of the World*, 178.

- 63 See Monica Juneja's book review of Som Prakash Verma, *Interpreting Mughal Painting*. Juneja details the problematic methodology used by Verma, who still draws from outmoded art history informed by colonial views.
- 64 See *Flora and Fauna in Mughal Art*, ed. Som Prakash Verma (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1999), 20.
- 65 *Ibid.*, 22–3.
- 66 These publications include Andrew Topsfield, *Visions of Mughal India: The Collection of Howard Hodgkin* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2012) and *Paintings from Mughal India* (Oxford: Bodleian Library Publications, 2008); *Eva and Konrad Seitz Collection of Indian Miniatures: Mughal and Deccani Paintings*, ed. John Seyller, with introductions and interpretations by Konrad Seitz, Museum Reitberg (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011); John W. Seyller, W.M. Thackston, *The Adventures of Hamza: Painting and Storytelling in Mughal India* (Washington, DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2010); a French translation of the Ramayana by Valmiki with images of the specimen commissioned by Akbar from the Musée Guimet in Paris, *Ramayana de Valmiki illustré par les miniatures indiennes*, introduction and commentaries by Amina Taha Hussein-Okada, foreword by B.N. Goswamy, trans. from Sanskrit to French under the direction of Madeleine Biardeau, 7 vols. (Paris: Editions Diane de Selliers, 2011); *The Indian Portrait*, ed. Rosemary Crill and Japil Jariwala (London: National Gallery of Portraits, 2010); *Muraqqa', Imperial Mughal Albums from the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin*, ed. Elaine Wright (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, distributed by University Press of New England, 2008); B.N. Goswamy and Caron Smith, *Domains of Wonder: Selected Masterworks of Indian Paintings* (San Diego: San Diego Museum of Art, 2005). These catalogs echo previous publications such as Susan Stronge's numerous works, among them *Painting for the Mughal Emperor*, and *Arts of Mughal India: Studies in Honour of Robert Skelton*, ed. Rosemary Crill, Susan Stronge, and Andrew Topfield (Ahmenabad; London: Mapin Publishing in Association with the Victoria and Albert Museum, 2004). One of the latest exhibition catalogs is Malini Roy and J.P. Losty, *Mughal India: Art Culture and Empire* (London: British Library, 2012).
- 67 Roxburgh employs the more subtle expressions "purely visual contemplation" and "privileging visual experience" and "fundamentally physical way," in *The Persian Album, 1400–1600*, 266–7, and 272. Still, this argument remains a shortcut to describe the perceptive and cognitive experience resulting from visual abstraction. It does not account for the meaning of these abstract forms in respect of the entire aesthetic structure in which they are inserted. These locutions may indifferently apply to pure decoration and more meaningful abstractions whose aesthetic function and intellectual dimension and significance are neither identified nor investigated.
- 68 Milo C. Beach, *King of the World*, 117.
- 69 Milo C. Beach, *The New Cambridge History of India*, 56–57, and see illustrations, 58–9.
- 70 Milo C. Beach, *The New Cambridge History of India: Mughal and Rajput Painting*, 8.
- 71 In *East Meet West: A Selection of Asian and European Art from the Tata Collection*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2010), 72. In this conference, a specialist on Indian manuscripts repeatedly uttered the phrase "naïve style."

- 72 Susan Stronge, *Painting for the Mughal Emperor*, 121.
- 73 Ebba Koch, *King of the World*, 178.
- 74 Gülru Necipoğlu in *The Topkapi Scroll*, 210.
- 75 The theoretical literature on abstraction in art is plentiful, but here is a recent and concise text by Paul Crowther, “The Logic and Phenomenology of Abstract Art,” in *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts*, 99–119. See also my study on geometry in Islam, “Abstraction, Kinetics and Metaphors: The Geometries of the Alhambra,” in *Beauty and Islam*, 69–93.
- 76 See, for example, the geometric design in the cosmographic description of the seven spheres of the heavens in Qur’an 67: 3 “*Surat al-Mulk*,” “the Kingdom”: “He is the Almighty, the All-forgiving, Who created seven heavens one upon another. Thou seest not in the creation of the All-Merciful any imperfection.” *Qur’an*, trans. Ahmad ‘Ali (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
- 77 Susan Stronge, *Painting for the Mughal Emperor*, 26.
- 78 In Chapter 4 the section on Persian painting proposes an interpretation of this pattern as a meaningful component of the iconography.
- 79 Monroe C. Beardsley seeks “to distinguish statements about aesthetic objects from statements about their effects,” in “Phenomenal Objectivity,” in *Aesthetics*, 34–43. See also “Affective terms,” 41–3.
- 80 A judgmental view of stiff, cold, and formal Shahjahani portraits pervades the entries “E. Shah Jahan,” and “Illustration-Painting under Shah Jahan (r. 1628–1658),” in *The Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art and Architecture*, vol. III, 15, and vol. II, 261.
- 81 *The Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art and Architecture*, vol. II, 262. On the same page is another example of the art history language used in this encyclopedia: “The stiffness and formality of approach, even in the borders around portraits, is more apparent in the so-called Late Shah Jahan Album.” To quote another example, in Thomas W. Lentz and Glenn D. Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision: Persian Art and Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press; 1989), one may read, “The highly stylized and artificial world depicted in Timurid poetic painting . . .” or “The vision presented – static, conventional and decidedly artificial – united style and content in the same restricted mode of perception,” 124 and 163. As in many other scholars’ work, this study overemphasizes the dynastic political instrumentalization of painting and does not identify other less obvious but equally important meanings related to more complex aesthetic elaborations.
- 82 Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art and Architecture*, 262.
- 83 *Ibid.*, 261.
- 84 Ebba Koch uses this expression on the first page of her introduction to *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*.
- 85 Amina Okada, *Imperial Mughal Painters*, 15, and Ebba Koch, *King of the World*, 131.

- 86 For example, Papal patronage was no different than Mughal patronage. While Italian art of the fifteenth century and sixteenth century is explicated in much more depth and its multiple artistic-aesthetic dimensions beyond its political significances are illuminated in the relevant academic literature, the use of this art in politics has been investigated as a defined genre, a topic per se, but not as an overarching explanatory pattern. These studies show that in the West patrons had no less control or political ambition. See Jan L. de Jong, *The Power and the Glorification: Papal Pretensions and the Art of Propaganda in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth-Century* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013).
- 87 Quotation from B.N. Goswamy's review of Ebba Koch's *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, in *India Today*, July 23, 2001. <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/book-review-mughal-art-and-imperial-ideology-author-ebba-koch/1/230775.html>.
- 88 Amina Okada, *Imperial Mughal Painters*, 15.
- 89 Ebba Koch's words in *Occasional Papers: Dara-Shikoh Shooting*, 36–42.
- 90 Ebba Koch quoted in *Occasional Papers*, 39. To prove her point that Shahjahani painting was not all about "formalism" (not in the Greenbergian sense but understood as the politically determined normativity and codification of the forms as opposed to free expression), Koch highlights with praise the example of Payag, who was the court artist who developed and thoroughly explored stylistic illusionism and, as such, one of the Mughal figures closest to the European painters. Koch also employs the term "formalism" throughout her study of the Windsor Castle Padshahnama, in *King of the World*, particularly in her discussion "the Hierarchical Principles of Shah-Jahani Painting," 135–42.
- 91 For example, this essay makes a pertinent use of the trope of politics: Ebba Koch, "My Garden Is Hindustan: The Mughal Padshah's Realization of a Political Metaphor," in *Middle East Garden Traditions: Unity and Diversity, Questions, Methods and Resources in a Multicultural Perspective*, ed. Michel Conan, 31st Dumbarton Oaks Colloquium on the History of Landscape Architecture (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection and Spacemaker Press, 2007, distributed by Harvard University Press, 2007), 158–75.
- 92 Gauvin A. Bailey, *The Art of the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773*.
- 93 See the theoretical discussion on syncretism by Jean Fisher, "The Syncretistic Turn," 223–41.
- 94 In this respect hybridity is given the same plain significance that Eloise Brac de la Perrière gives to the term in chapter 7 of her seminal book on the manuscripts from India in the period of the Sultanates until the sixteenth century, "L'hybridité des styles," in *L'art du livre dans l'Inde des sultanats* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2008), 215. See also Avinoam Shalem, "Hybride und Assemblagen in Mittelaaterlichen Schatzkammer. Neue Ästhetische Paradigmata im Hinblick auf die 'Andersheit,'" in *Le trésor au Moyen Age, Discours, pratiques et objets* (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2010), 297–313.
- 95 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. by Mark Lester with Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin Boundas (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 174, and 172–76, French edition, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969). See also *The Deleuze Dictionary*, 77–78; Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Deleuze and Guattari*,

- Anti-Oedipus* (London: Continuum, 2004), 5–9; Stephen Sepke, *Art as Abstract Machine*; Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (London: Athlone Press, 1994), French edition, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968); Tim Clark, “A Whiteheadian Chaosmos: Process Philosophy from a Deleuzian Perspective,” *Process Studies* 28, 3–4 (Fall/Winter 1999): 179–94.
- 96 See Eloise Brac de la Perrière, *L’art du livre dans l’Inde des sultanats*, and my analysis of this material in Chapter 3. Regarding Victorian art, see *Transculturalism in British Art*, ed. Julie F. Codell (Farnham, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012).
- 97 It is worth mentioning an interesting conversation I recently had with Lev Arie Kapitaikin, a specialist of Islamic art in Sicily. He discussed issues of terminology and definition that he encounters when attempting to describe the hybrid architectural decorative program of the famous Cappella Palatina in Palermo, which includes Christian mosaics and a spectacular *muqarnas* ceiling (a geometric formation in Islamic architecture).
- 98 All these aspects of hybridity, linguistic, sociological, historical, ideological, etc., have received considerable attention. There is no point in repeating these theories unless they are necessary for my argumentation. See Steven Leuthold, *Cross-Cultural Issues in Art: Frames for Understanding* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2010), and Finbarr B. Flood who discusses the various theoretical propositions on cultural hybridity and related categories such as translation or transculturation in the introduction to *Objects of Translation*, 1–9. Flood also provides a substantial bibliography on the subject in the framework of cultural studies.
- 99 Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation*, 5.
- 100 See Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York; London: Routledge, 1994) and “Postmodernism/Postcolonialism,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 435–51.
- 101 See, for example, the essays in the sections “Fluid Borders: Mediterranean Art Histories” and “Hybrid Renaissances and Beyond,” in *Crossing Cultures*, 134–233.
- 102 Homi K. Bhabha, “On Global Memory: Reflections on Barbaric Transmission,” in *Crossing Cultures*, 46–57.
- 103 See Jean Fisher, who discusses Homi Bhabha’s concept of hybridity in “The Syncretistic Turn,” and the quotation from the introduction to part III, in *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*, 237 and 216.
- 104 See the essays in the section “Indigeneity/Aboriginality, Art/Culture and Institutions,” in *Crossing Cultures*, 766–772; and Jean Fisher, “The Syncretic Turn,” 237.
- 105 This view betrays a broader postmodern tendency toward “boundaries dissolving.” See Rey Chow, “Postmodern Automats,” in *The Art of Art History*, 376–74.
- 106 Jean Baudrillard, quoted by Rey Chow in *The Art of Art History*, 369. See also Kim Toffoletti, *Baudrillard Reframed, Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

- 107 Sheldon Pollock quoted by Finbarr B. Flood in, *Objects of Translation*, 5.
- 108 To discuss this point further would take us too far from our subject, but a few ideas are expounded in my review of *In the Light of Medieval Spain: Islam and the West, and the Relevance of the Past*, ed. Simon R. Doubleday and David Coleman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), in *Al-Masaq: Islam and the Medieval Mediterranean* 23, 3 (December 2011): 257–66. In this review, I mention Daniela Flesler, who evokes the concept of “cultural racism” in “Contemporary Moroccan Immigration and its Ghosts,” 123.
- 109 Tony K. Stewart and Carl W. Ernst, “Syncretism,” in *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Peter J. Claus and Margaret Mills (New York: Routledge, 2003), 586. Quoted by Finbarr B. Flood in *Objects of Translation*, note 26, 272.
- 110 The definition and historical presentation of the different moments, phases, and manifestations of this art have been recently challenged by Christiane J. Gruber in “Questioning the Classical in Persian Painting: Models and Problems of Definitions,” in *Islamic Art Historiography*, ed. Moya Carey and Margaret S. Graves, see *Journal of Art Historiography*, June 6, 2012, <http://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/number-6-june-2012-2/>. I will return to this problem in Chapter 4, which addresses the question of the Persian pictorial aesthetic.
- 111 Fourteenth-century Persian painting presents a wide range of artistic references from all parts of Asia and Europe. Under Timurid domination, the main foreign artistic source was Ming China.
- 112 See Richard Vine, *New China, New Art* (Munich; London; New York: Prestel, revised and expanded edition, 2011), chapter 4, illustration 112.
- 113 See the original sociological-historical viewing of India in the seventeenth century by Gijs Kruijtzter, *Xenophobia in Seventeenth-Century India* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2009). This author sheds new light on issues of identity and alterity in the Sultanates of the Deccan, neighboring the Mughal Empire.
- 114 Expression borrowed from Vishajit Pandya, *In the Forest: Visual and Material Worlds of Andamanese History (1858–2006)* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009), 1.
- 115 This is discussed in an abundance of studies. See again Muzzafar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World*, and Annemarie Schimmel, *The Empire of the Great Mughals*.
- 116 For a definition and discussion on the concept of appropriation, see Robert S. Nelson, “Appropriation,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, 160–73.
- 117 See Gauvin A. Bailey’s detailed discussion on the existing terminology and the processes they designate, “Trying to Name It: ‘Acculturation’ and ‘Mestizo Art,’” in *The Art of the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773*, 22–31.
- 118 This question is debated in Chapter 3.



**PART II**  
**The Mughal Pictorial Becoming:  
From the Beginning of the Empire (1526)  
to the End of Shah Jahan's Reign (1658)**

Proof Copy



## Genesis of Aesthetic Hybridity in Mughal Painting

What we call *form* leads us to recognize a body; the body itself leads us to what we call *a notion, an idea*. Thus, on seeing the form of a letter, we recognize the letter, or a word, and this again will lead us to some idea. Similarly in the case of what people term a *picture*.

Abu'l-Fazl in A'in-I Akbari

Sooner or later, for example, in talking about almost any art, a word like "reality" is bound to crop up: Yes, in some sense, of course, painters are interested in reality. But in *what* sense?

Monroe C. Beardsley

The scarcity of material evidence preceding the reign of Akbar (1556–1605) veils the genesis of Mughal painting and a fortiori its aesthetic hybridity in mystery.<sup>1</sup> No object produced in India under the patronage of Babur (1526–30) and Humayun before his exile (1530–40) is known to have survived. The first artifacts undoubtedly commissioned by Mughal patrons come from Humayun's workshop in Kabul active between 1545–46 and 1555 after his eviction from the throne by an Afghan usurper who forced him into exile in 1540<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 30). Humayun found asylum at the Safavid court of Shah Tahmasp (1524–76) in Tabriz between 1542 and 1545, and finally reconquered his lands in Northern India in 1554–55. According to a convincing study by Laura E. Parodi, the "earliest datable Mughal painting" is dated to 1546, and until archaeological science advances further, "it is only from the few surviving works produced for Humayun in Kabul between 1545 and 1555 that scholars may be able to assess the early steps of Mughal painting."<sup>3</sup>

However, lack of evidence is not the only issue. The aesthetic reading of this early material also raises questions, and archaeology is not the only way to address the elusive beginnings of Mughal painting. It is possible to widen the research perspective inquiry into the roots of Mughal pictorial hybridity and to overcome the archeological vacuum of the pre-exile period (1526–40) by means of inductive reasoning. One possibility is to re-explore the Indian



15 *The Commander of the Celestial Army Takes an Embryo from a Brahman Caste Woman*, from a manuscript of the Kalpasutra (Book of Ritual), c. 1450. Gujarat, India. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper.  
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channel from the pre-Mughal Sultanate period (thirteenth–early sixteenth centuries) to Akbar’s reign, conceptualizing the exile as a separate event in the genealogy of Mughal painting. But two problems have been encountered while consulting the studies on pre-Modern Sultanate book art. First, critical findings on Sultanate pictorial expression remain meager as art archaeological and historical studies dominate the work on this material.

Second, a blur shrouds the correlation between this material and early Mughal painting, save for evidence of the continuity of pictorial practices from one era to the beginning of the other (Figs. 15–16, 22–7, 31). Yet, within this gray area resides the secret of the genesis of Mughal painting as the product of multiple artistic experimentations based on the assemblage of hybrid imagistic systems. The latter have come together to form this emergent aesthetic entity: the Mughal picture, whose complex becoming, in the Deleuzian sense, is to be examined.



15a Detail

### **Underestimation of the Sultanate Contribution in the Discourse on Early Mughal Painting**

When the Timurid family of Babur settled in Northern India following the 1526 conquest, they came into contact with the Sultanates’ rich cosmopolitan culture. Successive Muslim rulers at Delhi, Daulatabad, and Agra, and their vassals had developed a multifaceted book art integrating Persian, Turkish, Arab, and Chinese pictorial traditions with the Indic lore of illustrated texts, itself highly diverse<sup>4</sup> (Figs. 15–16, 22–7). This art continued to be produced through the early Modern Mughal Empire. The question of the connectivity between this complex artistic production and the nascent Mughal painting in India has been unsatisfactorily probed for three main reasons.



16 Birth of Nemi to Queen Siva, Lustration of Nemi on Meru, from a manuscript of the Kalpasutra (Book of Ritual), c. 1450. India. Ink and colors on paper.  
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The first and most obvious reason is the absence of objects dating to the pre-exile period, which prevents art historians from studying precisely the modalities of transmission of the pictorial language between the Sultanate and early Mughal era.

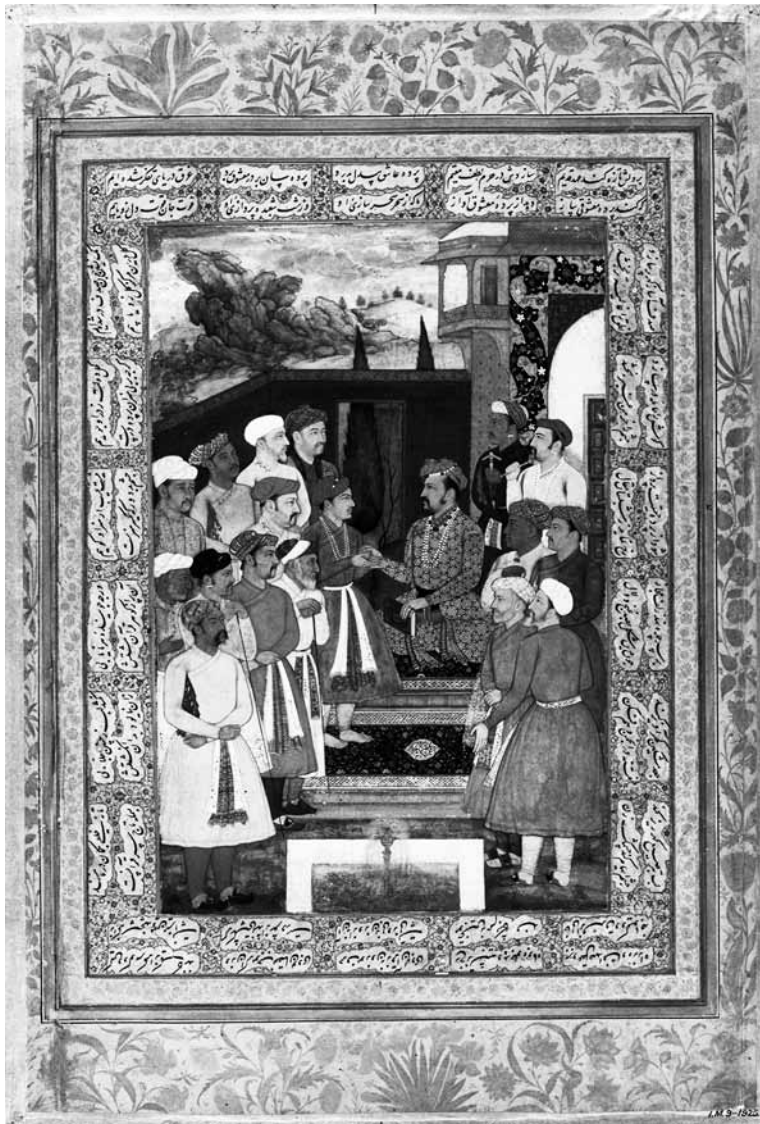
The second reason, less well grounded, stems from the combination of overall general incomprehension regarding the aesthetic workings and creative principles of Sultanate book art and the underestimation of their artistic qualities by many specialists of Mughal material. The unique cross-cultural character of these pre-Mughal artifacts, plainly termed “hybridity of styles” by Eloise Brac de la Perrière, is dispiritingly described by Susan Stronge in the following comment: “the manuscript illustrations are in



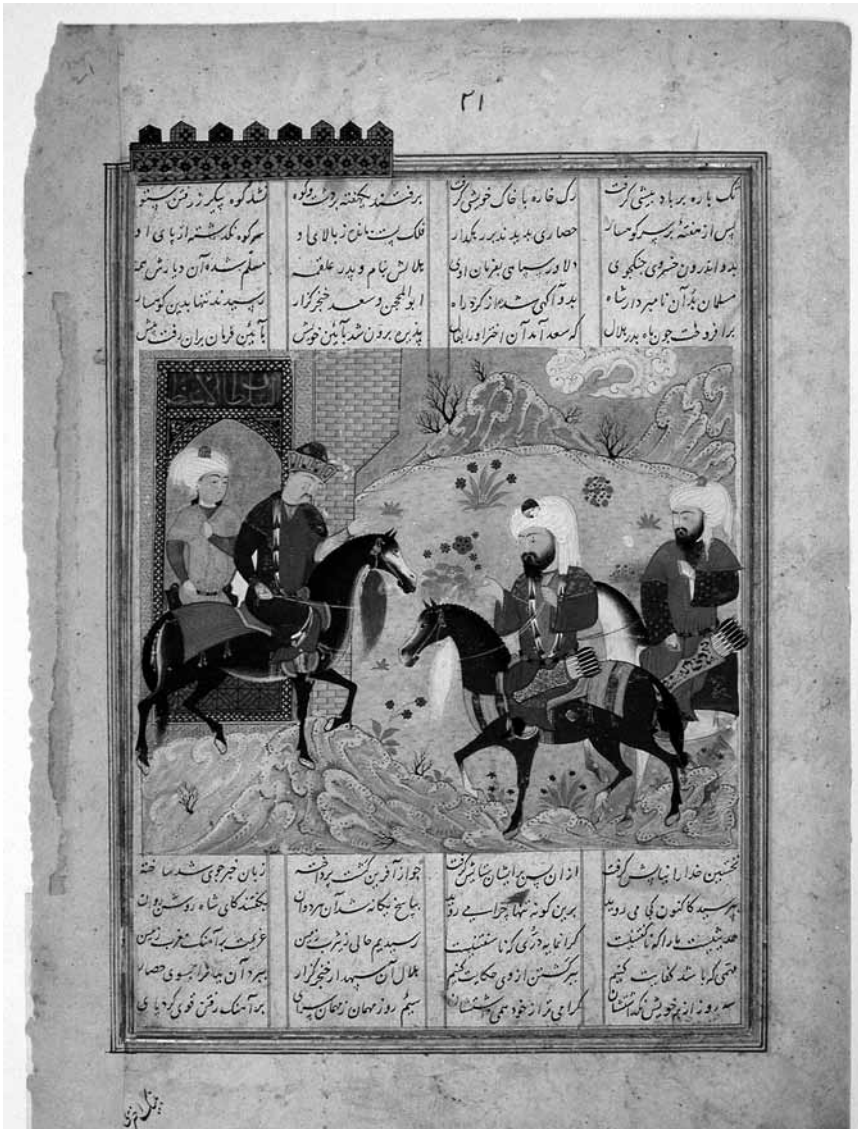
16a Detail

such bewilderingly different styles, it is impossible now to determine which elements continue well-established idioms, or even where they may have originated—although some may have been deeply embedded, reflecting the prescriptions of ancient Sanskrit treatises on painting, others seem to be innovations.”<sup>5</sup>

The third reason is that in addition to the general perplexity caused by this bold eclecticism of forms, the previously noted derogatory remarks here and there in Mughal art historiography describe the production of the pre-Mughal Indo-Muslim courts as inferior as compared with Mughal and Persian book art. It is thus surreptitiously suggested that a spectacular surge of creativity under more determining external cultural forces occurred upon the Mughal advent in India after an era of unremarkable artistic accomplishment, a suggestion underpinned by the ethnocentric idea that the flow of European art in the second half of the sixteenth century greatly advanced this process. Thus perceived as merely antiquarian and uneven in quality, Sultanate painting has been hastily classified as having only mild impact, as something dragged from the Mughal reign in particular thanks to sub-imperial patronage but then overwhelmed by the superior contribution



17 *Jahangir and Parviz*, attributed to Manohar, c. 1610–15. Album leaf.  
Mughal India. Opaque watercolor, and gold on paper.  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London



18 Abu'l Mihjan and Sa'd ibn Abi Wakkas Become Angry and Leave King Khusrau  
 (? Title uncertain), folio from Khavaranname (The Book of the East) of Ibn Husam al-Dina,  
 c. 1476-86. Shiraz, Iran. Opaque watercolor on paper.  
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19 *Elyas and Khizr at the Fountain of Life*, folio from an illustrated *Shahnama* (*Book of Kings*) of Firdausi (935–1020), late fifteenth century. Iran. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. © 2000–2014 Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights reserved

of the Western artistic influx and waves of Persianate artists coming from Iran and Central Asia after Humayun's reconquest of Northern India. Owing to this fresh Persian artistic influx, the hypothetical embryonic Indo-Mughal production of the pre-exile period and that of the Suri parenthesis have become hazy art in the discourse on the unfolding of artistic events at the dawn of the empire.

As a result, no truly significant linkage between the Sultanate and Mughal production has been found beyond the expected stylistic reminiscences that usually characterize the period of transition between two artistic regimes.<sup>6</sup> Even without necessarily falling into the trap of Eurocentrism, some scholars have concluded that to understand the innovations of the Mughal pictorial idiom one ought to research the European element, deemed more influential than the Sultanate legacy.<sup>7</sup> This view continues to be held despite findings in more recent studies that underscore a much more remarkable

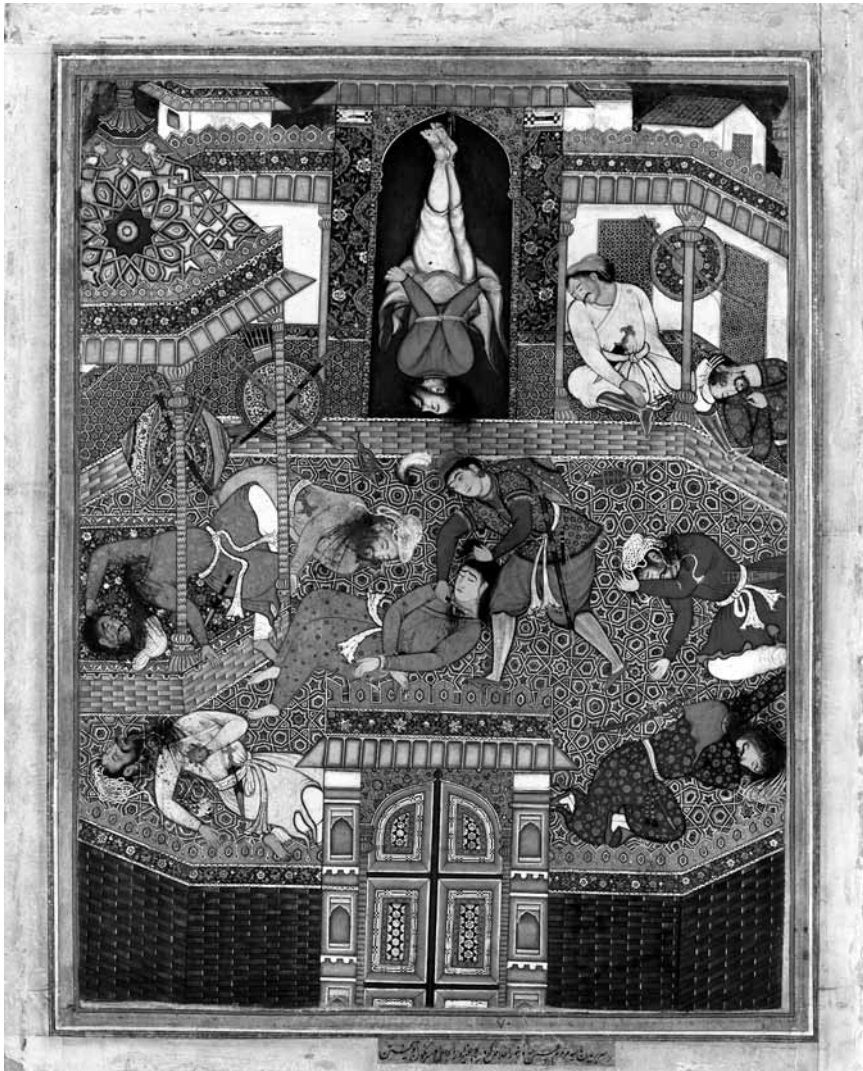
plurality of Mughal taste and a much greater permeability among the new dynasts' to local artistic traditions and visual cultural habits other than those coming from their Timurid heritage.<sup>8</sup>

#### APPARENT AESTHETIC GAP BETWEEN SULTANATE AND EARLY MUGHAL PAINTING

It is true though that if one sticks to the purely stylistic characteristics of the artifacts, the differences between the Persian forms in Sultanate miniature and those freshly integrated in early Mughal painting only widen the gap between the two productions. In the Sultanates' manuscripts, the original processing of the Persian models and the seemingly outmoded repertoire, fashion an antiquarian Persianate style in contrast with the late Timurid and Safavid pictorial expressions introduced to India after Humayun's repatriation (Figs. 25–6, 28–9, 31, 37–8). A glance at the earliest surviving artifacts commissioned by Mughal patrons, those commissioned by Humayun in



20 *Bird Trappers* (painting, verso; text, recto), unknown artist. Folio from a manuscript of a Persian translation of Baburnama (*Life of Emperor Babur*) c. 1590. Mughal India. Opaque watercolor on paper. Harvard Art Museums/ Arthur M. Sackler Museum. Photo: Imaging Department.  
© President and Fellows of Harvard College



21 *Mahiya Frees Zambur, Beheads His Sleeping Guards, and Suspends Gharrad in His Stead* (painting, verso), attributed to Mir Sayyid 'Ali, Nine Lines of Nasta'liq Script (text, recto), illustrated folio from a manuscript of the *Hamzanama*, c. 1570.

Illustration: opaque watercolor and gold on cotton fabric. Text: ink and gold on paper. Both sides framed with a paper border with opaque watercolor ruling. Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum. Photo: Imaging Department.

© President and Fellows of Harvard College

Kabul before 1555, reinforces this impression of a conspicuous shift in artistic practices, which the Mughal advent would have provoked in the subcontinent (Fig. 30).

Such stylistic differences, backed up by the historical introduction of Persian painters to India in 1555, the Mughal tradition of collecting Persian manuscripts attested since Babur's time, and the strong late Timurid-Safavid shaping of the early Akbari imperial production have led scholars to situate the inception of Mughal painting in Kabul. In other words, the art historical narrative of the genesis of Mughal painting mirrors the Mughal princely family's early history itself. Some analysts favor the late Timurid source, while others emphasize the more recent Safavid factor, but the prevailing opinion subscribes to this well-oiled scheme that minimizes the significance of the Indian element in the formation of the Mughal pictorial language.<sup>9</sup> Eloise Brac de la Perrière's question-answer summarizes this state of affairs of the studies: "What link unites, for example, Akbar's *Hamzanama* to that of the Sultanates? Nothing except the text itself."<sup>10</sup>

Although the focus on these seminal episodes in Tabriz and Kabul makes sense from the archaeological-historical viewpoint, three main problems affect this oversimplified discourse offering the Kabuli artistic sequence as the source of Mughal painting. First, to consider the artistic unfolding in India in the crucial period between the creation of the Mughal State and the return from Kabul as a hiatus, amounts to a shortcut in the interpretive process. It leaves no space for creative thinking or conjecture, which even without tangible evidence might advance knowledge of the elusive beginnings of Mughal painting. I will demonstrate the efficacy of this reasoning later in this chapter.

Second, the apprehension of the Kabuli production as "Mughal painting" exclusively based on an archeological-historical reading is dubious. And third, when one pays closer attention to the conceptual aspects of the two productions, the differences between Sultanate and early Mughal pictorial art then yield important similarities. Addressing these shortcomings will allow us to follow the more recent train of thought about the local anchorage of Mughal painting and to produce an alternative interpretation of its development as well as to discern as best as possible the role of pre-Mughal Indian book art in the elaboration of the Mughal imagistic language.

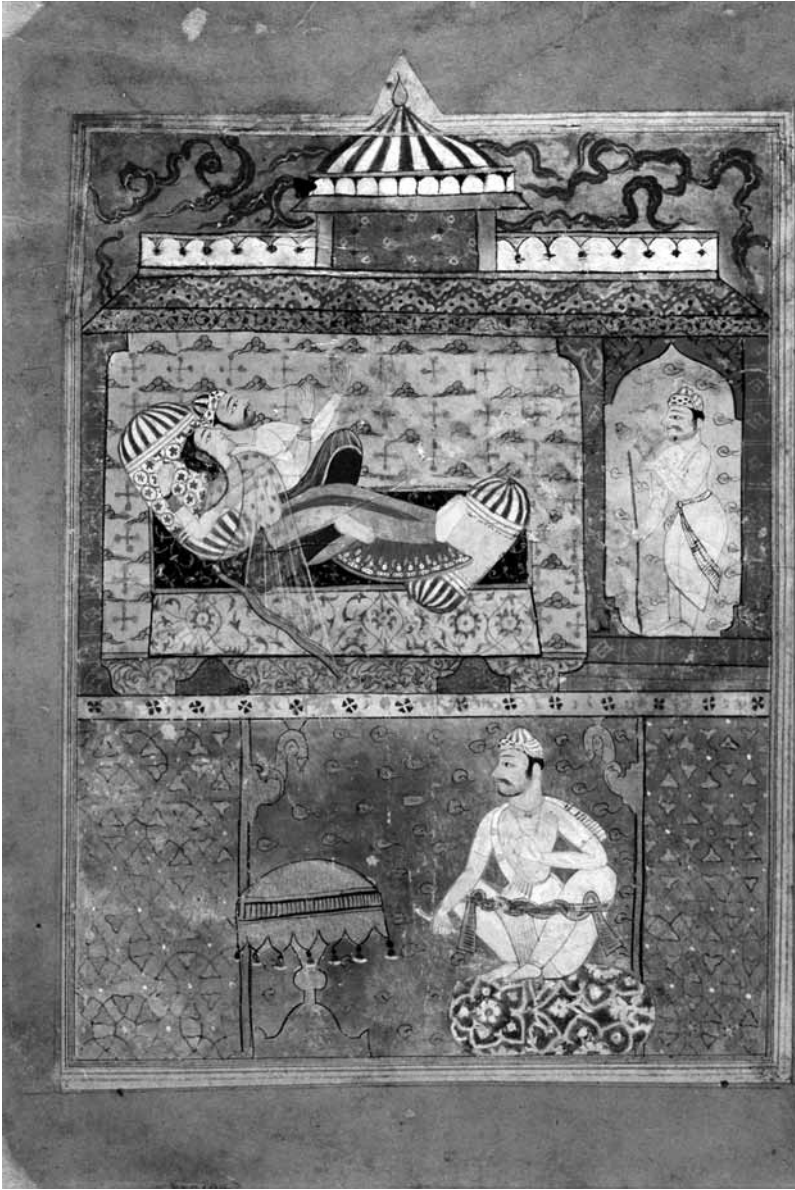
### **But What Is "Mughal Painting"?**

The "Mughal" aesthetic identity of the Afghani production during Humayun's times is a key question in the mystery of the formation of Mughal painting. As we know, originally the word "Mughal" referred to the Mongol ethnic affiliation of variegated groups of populations in Asia. Over time it meant

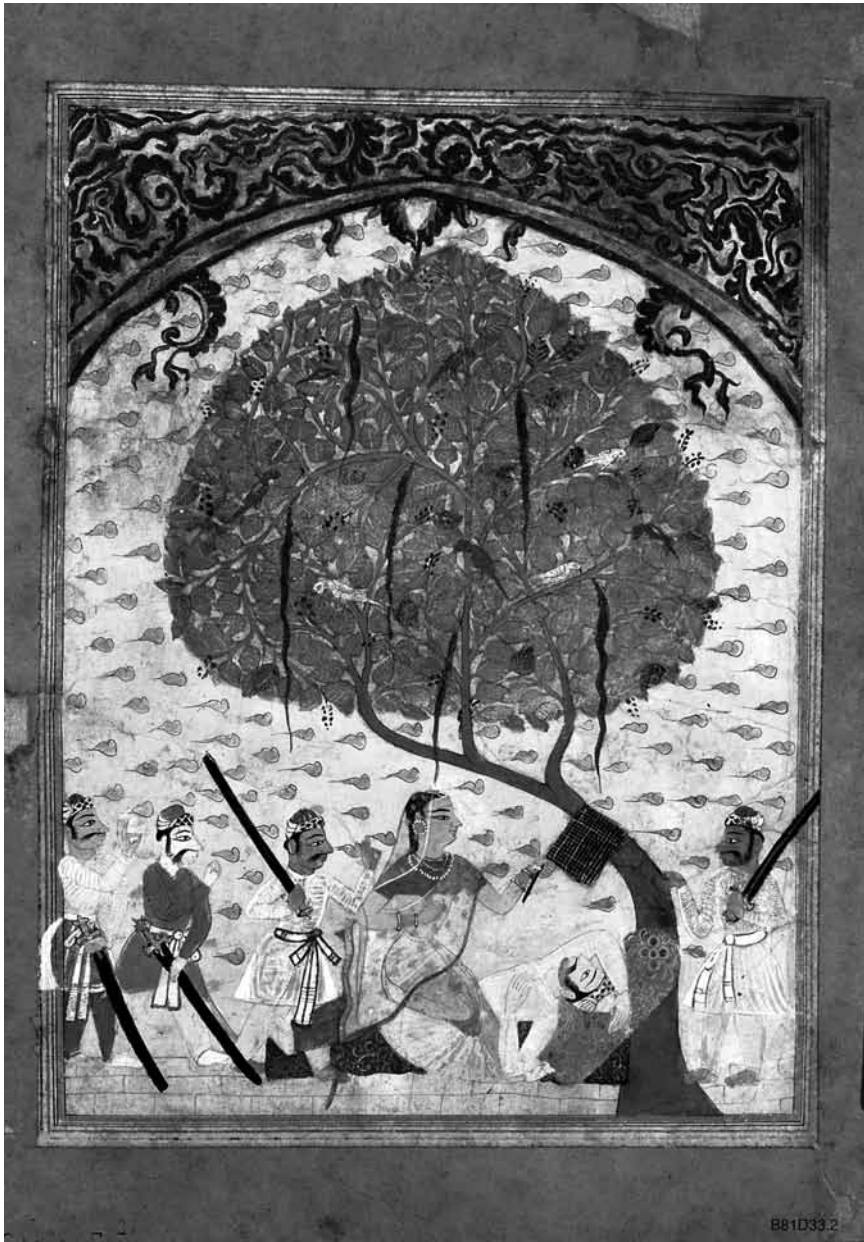


22 *Laurak Visits His Mother upon His Return Home*, from a manuscript of the *Chandayana* (*The Story of Chanda*), c. 1540. Probably Mandu, former sultanate of Malwa, Madhya Pradesh, India. Opaque watercolors and gold on paper.

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23 *The Caravan Leader Surjan Visits Laurak and Chanda*, from a manuscript of the *Chandayana (The Story of Chanda)*, c. 1540. Probably Mandu, former sultanate of Malwa, Madhya Pradesh, India. Opaque watercolors and gold on paper.  
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24 *The Heroine Chanda Fanning Her Beloved, Laurak, under a Tree*, from a manuscript of the *Chandayana* (*The Story of Chanda*), c. 1540. Probably Mandu, former sultanate of Malwa, Madhya Pradesh, India. Opaque watercolors and gold on paper.  
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more specifically anything related to the history and culture developed under the authority of the Timurid prince Babur's family and successors. The academic literature has brought the word's evolution and convolution to closure through a consensual acceptance of the latter meaning, while tacitly maintaining the interchangeability of the terms "Mughal" and "Timurid." Taking this linguistic status quo into account, the more precise question to ponder is the following: can we accurately call the Humayuni works from Kabul "Mughal" based solely on the patron's historical affiliation with the Timurid-Mughal royal house and Babur's former rule over the area?

As pointless as this interrogation may seem, it pinpoints the issue of what exactly "Mughal painting" means, particularly in the Kabuli context. Are the adjectives "Mughal" and "Timurid" equivalent and interchangeable in the art critical-aesthetic discourse as in the historical-political narrative? The answer is no.

The Mughal aesthetic label applied to the Humayuni paintings from Kabul is debatable when one considers the distinctions in pictorial art between plasticity (which includes style and image conceptualization and metaphysics) and the iconography's content, message, or narrative. By virtue of the ontological principle of the picture's double structure of matter and manner, the represented elements and pictorial aesthetic (including its metaphysical presentation) are not necessarily placed under the same identity sign. By inference, the patronage and the art's identity are to be distinguished as well. For example, could one characterize as "French art" the Marie de' Medici cycle painted by Peter Paul Rubens by using criteria such as the patron's political origin as the queen consort of France, or Henry IV's attire *à la mode française* and the works' original location in the royal palace in Paris? Plainly, from the critical-aesthetic viewpoint, the attribution "French art" is inaccurate. We cannot call Rubens's works for the French kingdom's royal family "French painting." Rather, Rubens's Baroque Flemish art has been chosen to serve these royal customers' aesthetic purposes and taste.

The use of the adjective "Mughal" to describe Kabuli paintings commissioned by Humayun is likewise problematic. The term correctly designates the patronage and, in the painting analyzed by Laura Parodi, admittedly the main represented figures (Fig. 30). But "Mughal" incorrectly describes its pictoriality. Why is that, since the appellations "Timurid" and "Mughal" are interchangeable? From a transcultural perspective, to properly analyze Rubens's aforementioned work, the expert at least has at disposal a limpidly defined lexicon, "Flemish art," "Italian Baroque art," "French art," or "French classicism," unlike the analyst of Mughal painting who must contend with the tricky linguistic binomial Timurid-Mughal. This equivalency between "Timurid" and "Mughal," joined with the specialists' tendency to be indifferent to conceptual distinctions between paintings' patrons, iconography, and imagistic idiom, is a significant source of confusion. Due to

the absence of clear categories, the arts in Western Afghanistan and Hindustan at the dawn of the Mughal reign have been conflated into an overarching artistic entity dissolving regional specificities and masking developments that are highly pertinent to the ontological definition of Mughal painting as a visual expression of “becoming” —again in the full Deleuzian sense of the process by which are formed “emergent unities that nonetheless respect the heterogeneity of their components.”<sup>11</sup>

*THAT IS NOT MUGHAL ART: THE PERSIANNES OF HUMAYUNI PAINTING FROM KABUL*

The “earliest datable Mughal painting” analyzed by Laura Parodi, like other surviving Kabuli works of the same period such as the representation of Humayun’s garden party from the British Museum, primarily reflect the pictorial evolution in the region anchored in the Timurid tradition and enriched by a Safavid influx.<sup>12</sup> As Parodi argues, the 1546 Kabuli piece was most certainly painted by the artist Dust Muhammad Mosawwir (not to be confused with his homonym, the Persian calligrapher), possibly a former pupil of Bihzad, the celebrated fifteenth-century master from Herat.<sup>13</sup> To depict what she convincingly interprets as an outdoors scene representing the celebration of Akbar’s circumcision, the painter has used the late Timurid manner in fashion at Herat and Kabul that he has been trained in, combined with Safavid features such as the enlargement of the painting’s format.<sup>14</sup> Had Dust Muhammad been required to depict a princely family of any other political and ethnic extraction, he would have resorted to the same composite pictorial techniques and expressions he knew and practiced in Kabul in these times. He would have changed only distinctive iconographic signs such as the figures’ clothing or hairdo in order to semiotically represent their specific social class and ethnic group. In brief, this work is fundamentally a Persian painting aesthetically inscribed in the Timurid and post-Timurid art history of the region.<sup>15</sup> And it has little in common with the late Persianate production of Sultanate India.<sup>16</sup>

*THE MISSING SEGMENT: UNKNOWN MUGHAL-SURI PAINTING BEFORE 1555*

A problematic consequence of the undifferentiated definition of this early art of painting in the historiography is that the unknown Indo-Mughal production of the pre-exile period has been conceptualized, by an automatic leveling, as a mere Persianate import coexisting with local productions. Rare preserved items such as Muhammad Juki’s *Shahnama* Babur, acquired and legated to his successors, indeed evidence a direct transfer of Persian art to India at the dawn of the Mughal Empire.<sup>17</sup> Yet, it is hardly conceivable that, for these roughly 14 years before 1540 on the subcontinent, no Mughal pictorial invention had occurred nor had this Persian import undergone transformation



25 *Rustam Carrying the King of Mazandaran to Kai Kavus*, folio from a *Shahnama* (*Book of Kings*) by Abu'l Qasim Firdausi (935–1020), illustrated manuscript, c. 1430–40. India. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. © 2000–2014 Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights reserved

by hybridization with the indigenous artistic traditions, if only by using the available pluralistic resources and workforce. The Sultanate heritage must have had a rapid impact not only on the pictorial practice itself but also, crucially, on the aesthetic consciousness of the new Mughal imperial and noble patrons. Consequently, even though no artifact can prove it, it is highly likely that the art of painted manuscripts in Afghanistan and Northern India between 1526 and 1555–56 took different developmental directions so that an original Indo-Mughal pictorial expression, distinct from the coeval Persianate art made in Afghanistan, might already have emerged before Humayun's flight to Iran. If only due to the mutative effect of socio-cultural mingling, the Persian art Humayun sponsored in Kabul and the emerging hybridized Indo-



26 *Gav and Talhand in Battle*, folio from a *Shahnama* (*Book of Kings*) by Abu'l Qasim Firdausi (935–1020), illustrated manuscript, c. 1430–40. India. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. © 2000–2014 Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights reserved

Mughal art he grew up with and left behind upon his eviction would already have necessarily constituted separate albeit cogenetic entities. As there is no reason to think the Suri parenthesis meant a cessation of artistic creation, an artistic expression that can be designated as “Indo-Mughal-Suri painting” ought to be considered as a factor in the process.

The art historical discourse cannot, because of a lack of evidence, ignore these cultural-artistic distinctions as hypothetical or conjectural. Regarding this early period of Mughal art history, this principled segregation between the pictorial outcomes of the two geo-cultural areas compels one to cease equating the Timurid and Mughal identity in the art critical narrative, and

to adopt instead more precise designations such as “Indo-Mughal,” “Indo-Timurid,” “Mughal-Suri,” “Afghan-Persian,” and “Afghan-Timurid.” With this change in terminology, the categorization “Mughal” in the sense of “Indo-Timurid,” applies to the pre-exile and post-exile pictorial production in the Indian subcontinent as distinct from the exile-period Persian painting from Kabul.

In summary, what these considerations about Mughal aesthetic ipseity infer is that the evidence of the earliest Humayuni painting unraveled by Parodi illuminates the late Timurid-Safavid Persian root among the numerous artistic sources that forged Indo-Mughal painting and that define it as a hybrid complexity, not just a version of Persian art colored with Indian features. Consequently, Parodi’s assertion about the 1546 Kabuli work, “In terms of size and quality, it is without doubt one of the finest works from the ‘Mughal school,’” would necessitate replacing “Mughal school” by “Afghan-Persian or Persianate school of Kabul under Mughal patronage.”<sup>18</sup> It then appears more clearly that, in aesthetic terms, a genuinely “Mughal” pictorial production is not concretely observable before the post-exile period inasmuch as the Mughal elements of the Kabuli pictorial production at our disposal are socio-historical and semiotic-narrative in nature. These elements are connected but external to the art itself in the same way the French elements are to Rubens’s aforementioned Flemish paintings. The Humayuni Afghan artifacts constitute a milestone in the evolution of Mughal painting, not as the first outcome of it, a status firmly attributed to the hypothetical hybrid Indo-Mughal-Suri production that may have developed in Northern India between 1526 and 1555. For this reason, the Kabuli objects commissioned by the Mughal monarch tell more about the developments subsequent to 1555 than those before 1540.

#### *RETELLING THE STORY OF EARLY MUGHAL PAINTING*

In this modified view of the artistic events in the early history of the Mughal Empire, the Mughal pictorial genealogy may be reconstituted and re-chronicled in relation to current interpretations focusing on the late Timurid-Safavid affiliation. If any distinctively Indo-Mughal pictorial art was formed during the momentous 14 years of Mughal sovereignty on the subcontinent before 1540, then the Kabuli sequence must be re-chronicled accordingly.

Like an unexpected detour on a planned route, Kabul stands out as an offbeat event, external to the “natural” course of Mughal pictorial becoming in the Indian artistic centers of the empire. To better understand the status of Kabul in this series of artistic adventures, one may view Kabul through the phenomenological prism of exile itself. In an unfolding pattern analogous to the phenomenon of expatriation and repatriation with its successive

phases of rupture, displacement, return, and reconstruction, the beginnings of Mughal painting included peregrination corresponding precisely to the Kabul-Tabriz sequence. The story's epilogue is familiar: At the end of his wanderings, Humayun, his mind full of Timurid-Safavid pictorial dreams and equipped with a team of two Persian masters, briefly retook artistic matters in hand in his re-conquered homeland. The gesture was decisive. It regenerated the pictorial practice that thrived under Akbar after succeeding his father.

Regeneration indeed, not generation, or *rebirth*, not birth, is the process that characterizes the outcome of these twists and turns in the Mughal pictorial rise. For these concepts of regeneration and rebirth convey an essential notion in this argumentation, the notion of preexistence. On this notion stands the restitution of the dimensional generative contribution of the pre-Mughal Indian element in the formation of Mughal painting and the localization of this development on the subcontinent, not in Kabul or elsewhere. One might object that such a distinction between generation and regeneration or birth and rebirth is uselessly convoluted since the hypothetical pre-exile Indo-Mughal pictorial art had been absorbed into the new Persian art-inspired creations. And such an objection indeed might have turned this discussion into speculation were not Sultanate painting proof that it had nurtured and influenced Mughal pictorial development far more significantly than has been understood. In bypassing the pre-exile archaeological vacuum, it is possible to highlight the strength of linkage and logic of continuity between these two pictorial productions, disrupted but not interrupted by the episode of Humayun's exile.

### **Re-evaluating the Role of the Sultanate Lore in the Mughal Pictorial Rise**

Knowledge of the pre-Mughal Indo-Islamic material and artistic culture generally has been considerably refined thanks to studies by scholars like Daud Ali, Finbarr B. Flood, and Eloise Brac de la Perrière, among others.<sup>19</sup> These studies have shed a helpful light on some elaborate cultural practices such as landscaping in architecture or book production whose importance and quality have tended to be eclipsed by laudatory presentations of the Mughal contribution in the traditional historiography on Indian art. My foregrounding of the Sultanate legacy in the genesis of Mughal painting is premised upon this advanced knowledge of pre-Modern India. And challenging the still prevalent double scheme of exceptionality and radical novelty of the arts and culture under the Mughals' patronage in comparison with that of their predecessors in India can reduce the troubling hiatus previously discussed.

*CHANGES BUT NO HIATUS*

Mainly created by the historiography on the Mughal material, this artificial qualitative scheme between the Sultanate and Mughal artistic cultures overemphasizes the shift brought about by the establishment of the Mughal Empire. Not only does the Sultanate pictorial corpus comprise masterful artworks, but this view of a sharp change has engendered a general tendency to attribute too systematically to the Mughal dynasts intellectual attitudes, cultural features and practices that were deeply rooted in preexisting local customs and habits, or that might have preexisted but remain ignored due to archaeological uncertainty. Typical of this tendency is the depiction in studies of a Mughal cultural profile characterized by an unprecedented receptivity of foreign cultures, religious openness, and princely commitment to the arts. The literature is replete with remarks like these: "The Mughal patronage of the arts was incessant and radically innovative for the Indian context," or the Mughals "reacted to the Indian visual stimulus," as if prior to this dynasty's advent things were dramatically different.<sup>20</sup>

While the Mughals unquestionably innovated as a result of their interactions with Indian multiculturalism, an open philosophy of alterity was by no means alien to pre-Modern cultures on the subcontinent.<sup>21</sup> At the Sultanates' court, the development of a literature based on translations, incorporations, or re-creations of Indic texts such as the *Chandayan* (or *Chandayana*), a Hindu romance rewritten and infused with Sufi meanings by the poet Maulana Da'ud of Dalmau in 1379, reveals a sensitivity and a capacity to cultivate Indic lore that formed a precedent of great significance to Mughal intellectual life.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, most of the studies single out Akbar's personality, praised for his exceptional religious tolerance and intellectual curiosity. But Akbar's transcultural leanings ought to also be fully reinserted into the old Indo-Islamic tradition of multifaith negotiation and intercultural dialogue.

The archaeology itself, always in progress, may bring new discoveries that could shift certitude about what was new, imported, or locally inherited in early Mughal culture. For example, Akbar has long been credited with introducing the Persian institution of *kitabkhana* (princely workshops specialized in the production of manuscripts) to the subcontinent. However, it seems more plausible that, as Laura Parodi suggests, Humayun's library, mentioned in the texts, included an equivalent of a *kitabkhana*, while Brac de la Perrière rightly argues this institution may have already existed in the medieval Sultanates despite the silence of primary sources on this matter.<sup>23</sup>

To conclude this argument, although aesthetic hybridity has a long history in the art of book illustration in Islamic India, it still constitutes one of the features that historians of Mughal art associate with Mughal creativity, overlooking the Sultanate precedent. As a result, the apparently inchoate bricolage of the pre-Mughal manuscripts stands implicitly opposed to and

thereby disconnected from the more unified syncretism of Akbari painting. This question of the evolution of one mode of hybridization into another is at the base of this reevaluation of the Sultanate element in the Mughal pictorial becoming.

*FROM ONE MODE OF HYBRIDIZING TO THE OTHER*

According to the terminology defined in Chapter 2, “eclecticism” characterizes the Sultanates’ pictorial hybridity and “syncretism” that of the Mughals. Although this scheme appears more like a separation than a connection, it rests upon interconnectivity, the former providing the root and impulse to the latter. The philosophy of difference expressed in these two forms of hybridism drives this synergy. As a general rule, eclectic hybridity such as that of Sultanate painting is characterized by the hyper-visibility of a pattern of divergence between its diverse components; therefore, it owes both its expressive and semantic power to a cumulative but serial and disjunctive rationale. When the eclectic construct is intentionally crafted, as opposed to an unintentional pastiche, it assigns to qualities of disparity and apparent disharmony a particular function, a positive value, and a dimensional significance presupposing full acceptance of the specific properties inherent in any differential relationship. These properties are those of impossibles, paradoxes, and mismatches of all kinds provoking varying degrees of tension, contradiction, and dissonance, from the simple contrast of differentiation to the dialectical intensity of conflict and, sometimes, the radical violence of clash.<sup>24</sup> By no means automatic signs of failure, such features in art may be actively sought after or consciously explored as a strategy of aesthetic expression and a way of conveying a particular ethos.

By virtue of these basic operating modalities and possibilities of use of aesthetic eclecticism, the heterogeneous array of the Sultanates’ book art ought to be more positively appreciated. It should be viewed not as a disharmonious and antiquarian collection of items lacking inventiveness but as the product of highly diversified intellectual interests, aesthetic tastes, and conscious initiatives to assemble a diversity that bespeaks an elaborate philosophy of difference and an ingenious management of multiculturalism. Thus understood without negative presuppositions, the disparity of Sultanate pictorial expression signals the prevalence of an inclusive politics of pluralistic knowledge that allows varied conceptions of poetics, beliefs, and art to express themselves despite the resistance of traditionalism, which was also strong in these societies. While the lively paintings exude this ecumenical spirit, the written sources also report events hinting at this Sultanate predisposition, as shown in the following example.

In an account of Akbar’s reign written in 1595, *Muntakhab al-tawarikh*, Abdul Qadir Badaoni mentions one of these events, which took place in a

fourteenth-century Sultanate court. The excerpt tells of how, during a poetic joust, a Sheikh justified with great persuasion his recitation of verses of the Hindu *Chandayan* romance before a skeptical Muslim audience:

In the year A.H. 722 (AD 1322–23) Khan-i Jahan, the vizier [at the court of Firoz Shah Tughluq], died and his son Juna Shah obtained that title; and the book *Chandayan* which is a masnavi in the Hindi language relating the love of Laurak and Chanda, a lover and his mistress, a very pleasing work (haalat bakhsh, Ranking translates this as “graphic”), was put to verse in his honor by Maulana Dau’d. There is no need for me to praise it because of its great fame in that country.

Makhdum Shaikh Taqiuddin [late fourteenth–early fifteenth centuries], a godly preacher (vai’z) used to read on some occasions poems of his [Maulan Dau’d] from the pulpit and people used to be strangely influenced by hearing them, and whenever certain learned men of that time asked the Sheikh, saying that what is the reason for this Hindi masnavi being selected, he answered: the whole of it is divine truth and a pleasing subject, worthy of the ecstatic contemplation of devout lovers and conformable to the interpretation of some of the ayat [signs] of the Qur’an and the sweet singers of Hindustan. Moreover, by its public recitation human hearts are taken captive.<sup>25</sup>

The wise man’s argument echoes the argumentation that later Akbar delivered to legitimate his commission of a Persian translation of the *Yog Vashisht*, a book of Hindu philosophy about the illusory nature of existence written in the twelfth or thirteenth century. The inscription on the colophon of a 1602 illustrated specimen says, “God is great! I commissioned the translation from Hindi [to Persian] of this book, the *Yog Vashisht*, one of the stories of the ancients, in the time I was king in year 20 in the city of ... . It is a very good book if one hears it with the ear of intelligence.”<sup>26</sup>

One may then conclusively describe the phenomenon of Sultanate pictorial eclecticism in the following terms that underline its crucial importance as the precursor of aesthetic hybridity in Mughal painting. In its boldness and scope, this eclecticism could have only resulted from a more complex creative dynamic than an aleatory, improvised, and pragmatic assembling of existing traditions. While this practice of aggregating preexisting forms bears a touch of conservatism, more significant and implicative is that it also presupposes an ethos of cultural synthesis transcending political and social values.<sup>27</sup> This means the aesthetic pluralism of the Sultanates’ manuscripts was integral to a system of ideals valorizing and cultivating the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of the diverse and the different. Also, crucially, this implies a positive vision and comprehension of the concepts of contradiction, paradox, and dissonance inherent to cultural and aesthetic hybridity. I will borrow again Gilles Deleuze’s conception of “the productive difference” to underscore that in the Sultanate context, at the ideal level, “divergence is

[was] no longer a principle of exclusion, and disjunction no longer a means of separation. Impossibility is [was] now a means of communication."<sup>28</sup>

Consequently, in Sultanate culture it seems the disparity, disjunctivity, and disharmony at the core of aesthetic eclecticism's cognitivism were not only tolerated and assumed but also valued and valorized as the result of genuine accomplishment. One might even suggest that for the Sultanate consciousness, the differentiating and differential properties of the hybrid painted manuscripts as reflections of politics of cultural assembling must have been the visible manifestation of the consistency and skills with which the endeavor of multicultural cultivation by the governing class was carried out. The same inclination toward an assumed eclectic hybridism has been observed in other aspects of Sultanate visual culture. In architecture, for example, Finbarr B. Flood accurately interpreted the gesture of assembling mixed building styles capitalizing on the visibility of their differences, as "a search for dynamic equivalence, a striving for equivalent effect rather than strict formal or syntactic equivalence."<sup>29</sup>

As proven by the ensuing Mughal development, the Sultanates thus built a solid and durable foundation of cultural values promoting artistic ecumenism and asserting the creative potency of adaptive practices such as the emulation, accumulation, appropriation, and copying of consummate familiar forms and foreign traditions, or traditions perceived as foreign. In systematizing aesthetic eclecticism, pre-Modern Sultanate culture paved the way for more sophisticated forms of hybridism and a full-fledged syncretism to prosper in Islamic India over the long term, in the event or at least until Shah Jahan's reign for the early Modern period that concerns us. This borderless conception of art and culture has instituted the hybridizing strategy as the surest path toward artistic achievement and innovation, deeply and durably inscribing hybridness as a valued aesthetic pursuit in the Indo-Muslim consciousness. It has erected parameters of creation that none of the political vicissitudes and/or cultural shifts between Babur's conquest of Northern India and the stabilization of the Mughal State in the Akbari era could alter, remove, or replace. Not even the mighty powerful late Timurid-Safavid artistic flow from 1555 could resist the penetrative impact of this Sultanate aesthetic paradigm, as evidenced in the pluralistic spectrum of the Akbari imperial and sub-imperial pictorial expressions. Nor could this fresh Persian artistic flow spoil the ecumenical spirit this conceptual paradigm conveys. Therefore, the reputed ability of the Mughals to appropriate and manipulate the most eclectic plastic grammar and interfaith themes in painting is a direct outcome of this profoundly determining legacy of the pre-Mughal Sultanates. But this is not all.

Together with their philosophy of hybridism, the Sultanates also bequeathed to the Mughals patterns and concepts specific to the pictorial practice itself, whose significances for the formation of Mughal book art

have been variably ignored, overlooked, or unsatisfactorily explained. While the Sultanate illustrated manuscripts may appear like a repository of long-existing traditions, punctuated here and there with rare new iconographic elements, they actually contain the seeds of developments of the broadest reach for the evolution of pictorial art on the subcontinent.

### Chief Innovations in Sultanate Painting

Designing new configurations by putting pre-existing eclectic forms together constitutes a creative gesture. For the principle of building convergence despite divergence and compossibility despite impossibility that underpins eclecticism does not exclude, and even often allows the formation of more conjunctive or symbiotic syntheses. One might say the eclectic construct is a natural site for symbiosis to form, but only a certain type of symbiosis can occur as eclecticism by nature maintains differential relationship between its components.

#### *FIRST INNOVATION: ELEMENTARY FORMS OF SYNCRETISM*

In Sultanate book art, forms of blending occurred even though no syncretistic strategy, properly speaking, was actively and systematically pursued to join variegated traditions together in new compositions. The stylistic imbrications observed by Brac de la Perrière, such as the admixture of Jain and Mamelouk or Hindu and Persian picturing modes one may find in some illustrations, attest to this kind of minimalist synthesis (Figs. 22–4). These composite images do not constitute full-fledged syncretistic instances. Instead they form elementary syncretistic constructs stemming from a particular process more experimental than programmatic. I see in this process the work of “fortuitous convergence,” as Philipp Wagoner designates the product of contact-events that are based on favorable opportunities of meeting more circumstantial than planned.<sup>30</sup> In fact, in the cosmopolitan Sultanate context, artistic models of different origins would circulate, coincidentally be put together, and intersect naturally, or mingle spontaneously one could say. The transfer of iconographic registers from one type of image to another, such as the integration of the Persian motif of piled up rocks or patterned pointed arches in representations of Hindu manuscripts, illustrate this type of convergence<sup>31</sup> (Fig. 24). Constitutive affinities between different objects of a fortuitous hybridizing event also facilitated the process. For example, the aforementioned stylistic fusion analyzed by Brac de la Perrière between Jain and Mamelouk paintings clearly rests upon similar structural qualities such as flatness of design, bold graphic line, compartmented scenes, monumentality of the figures, and

solid coloring.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the Mamelouk tradition found “familiar forms in the unfamiliar [Jain] context,” to paraphrase Finbarr Flood, thereby allowing the construction of a conjunctive synthesis in a dominant disjunctive configuration of heteroclitite elements.<sup>33</sup>

Still, all these occurrences of more fusional hybridity remain more eclectic than syncretistic. And they form just one part of other much more implicative Sultanate creations. Two main unprecedented features with profound effects on the subsequent unfolding of Indian painting can be detected: the rise of the image in the book’s scriptural space and the centrality of the human figure in the iconography.

#### SECOND INNOVATION: THE RISE OF THE IMAGE IN THE BOOK’S STRUCTURE

Intrinsically, this scattered form (*forme éclatée*) of hybridity known as eclecticism implies a certain flexibility in the criteria of aesthetic correctness and a certain looseness in the application of artistic convention. This alleviation of strict rules favors inventiveness and indeed, it seems the rather unrestrictive artistic climate of the Sultanates allowed decisive conceptual shifts to occur alongside the simple intersection of existing forms already noted. The first remarkable change regards the general rhetorical function of the figural register in the manuscript’s articulation between texts and images. In the late pre-Modern Sultanate period, in comparison with their original Persianate, Arab, and Indic models, the Indian artifacts display a remarkable variety of formats in the painted zones in relation to the scriptural medium that hints at an evolution in the criteria of formal subordination of illustrations to writing in favor of the former. In some cases the book or folio appears to provide merely a pretext to painting (Figs. 22–7). This pattern pervades Sultanate book art in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, but it is the highly innovative manuscripts of the *Chandayan* (or *Chandayana*) romance that stand out of the corpus in introducing a revolutionary book construct.

In the *Chandayan*, full-page paintings symmetrically mirror the text<sup>34</sup> (Figs. 22–4). The size of the images and absence of text-boxes or inscriptions on the illustrated folios are as remarkable as their unprecedented frequency. An illustrated page accompanies each verse. The book is therefore as much a visual display as a text-bearing medium. In thus setting out a cognitive competition between the visual and the textual, these optically riveting illustrations profoundly transform the phenomenality and experience of the codex, which is in principle primarily a scriptural medium. They bring to mind the equally unusual large and colorful paintings of the *Beatus* books in early medieval Christian Spain, often similarly arranged in bands and playing with a contrasting palette of solid hues.

The cause and motivations of this momentous shift in Sultanate painting are intriguing. Brac de la Perrière suggests that this new book format was

meant to provide a visual aid to beholders who could not understand Avadhi, the romance's language.<sup>35</sup> However, beyond linguistic questions the *Chandayan* may pose, it is impossible not to sense an aesthetic-philosophical *raison-d'être* in this emancipation of the picture from writing, and not to tie it to the creative dynamic of the Sultanate schools of painting. The power attributed to the figural in the manuscripts clearly has something to do with a growing interest in visuality and an unprecedented valorization of the act of seeing in the Indo-Islamic cultural space in which the items were created, a phenomenon that I would call "the rise of an Islamic scopic regime" in India.<sup>36</sup> Even more, the creation of large, full-page paintings may have been encouraged and intimately correlated with the third major innovative feature in Sultanate book art: the assertive and hypnotic presence of the human figure.

*THIRD INNOVATION: THE IMAGERY'S ANTHROPOCENTRISM AND BODY-CENTRISM*

The anthropocentrism of Sultanate iconography has been neglected in the critical literature on this material. Yet, when one browses through the cosmopolite set of manuscripts, with all the styles and cultural affiliations united, what attracts the eye at first is the human form—people, crowds, couples, or individuals presented in all kinds of postures, situations, and dramas, in action or in repose, with variegated physiognomic appearances, and often repeated in kinetic anthropomorphic patterns. The aesthetic experience of these images produces a visceral sense of the pulse of life, of vital energy, whether contained and introverted or released in figures' animated gestures, powerful bodies, lively facial expressions, or the conspicuous gaze of their enlarged, protruding eyes in Indic illustrations, like a locus of vital flux.<sup>37</sup> I would term the pulsational phenomenality of human representation in Sultanate art as "plastic vitalism"; that is, a vitalist, imagistic language and visceral expressiveness that parallel or echo in art forms the philosophy of "vitalism" inasmuch as it places at the center of its conceptual construct a vital corporeal force. According to the vitalist view, this force resides in the world's living entities but is not solely explicable by objective laws of physiology and chemistry.<sup>38</sup> In the Sultanate imagistic space, the human form materializes, visualizes, and thematizes a force of analogous might. It could be said that the Sultanate figurations revolve around a vitalist aesthetic metaphysics of the body that posits the body as a metaphysical projector, an incarnated metaphysics.

Notably, in the fifteenth-century corpus of Hindu books, the systematization of the profiled figure contributed to this imagistic conceptualization, presenting the human body in the forefront of the picture (Figs. 22–4, 27). Aesthetically, these profiles accentuate the visibility of faces and bodies with the drawing's thick black lineament that forms an abstract, solidly colored

background characteristic of the items bearing them. Contoured in this way, the figures pop out against the flat pictorial plane, creating a Henri Matisse-like effect of “*papier découpé collé*,” strengthening the thickness and tangibility of their corporeality through, not mass and volume as in three-dimensional naturalist representation, but two-dimensional solidity and the clarity of the silhouette.

Again, the *Chandayan* specimens appear particularly remarkable for their participation in this new representational mode centered on the body, whatever the nature or identity of the painted protagonist, simple mortal, deity, or semi-deity, and regardless of the content of the illustrated episode. By eliminating the interference of writing, expanding the pictorial field, and applying the profile view, these large pictures efficiently place the focus on the individuals involved in the narrative.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, although the folio’s more ample dimensions might have been used as an opportunity for embellishment or ornamental complication, the norm appears to be instead a sketchy, rather minimalist design surrounding the figures, thus showcasing their visibility. Plainly colored or lightly patterned areas frequently fill scenes’ spaces, while brighter or stronger colors are applied to parts of the protagonists’ body and clothing, drawing attention to them with slight to moderate peripheral perceptual distraction. Even in the most luxurious settings, the figure usually commands the picture’s visual rhetoric.

In conclusion, prior to the Mughal advent, a new figural regime had emerged in India, presenting an imagistic conception in tight proximity



27 *Krishna Battles the Armies of the Demon Naraka*, page from a dispersed *Bhagavata Purana* manuscript, c. 1520–40. Delhi- Agra area. Ink and opaque watercolor on paper. © 2000–2014 Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights reserved

with the lived existence through a hyper-phenomenalized, hyper-concrete display of figures' corporeality. In this sense, this figural regime falls under the sign of mimesis. For although Sultanate pictorial art was not concerned with illusionist representational modes and relied heavily on stylized forms and abstract designs, its portrayal of the body-subject, hyper-visible, hypnotic, visceral, and powerfully vitalistic constitutes a direct and active referent to Nature. Otherwise termed, through the reflexivity with our carnal experience of the world, this figuration instills a strong mimetic tension in the illustrations.<sup>40</sup> But then a pressing question arises: Why did such a mimetic, body-centric shift in the pre-Modern Islamic painting occur in Sultanate India and not elsewhere? Why in India?

Contemplating this question is key to understanding the causal links between Sultanate and Mughal painting. It is therefore crucial to examine the cultural ferment specific to the Indian subcontinent that formed "the context effect," as Hubert Damisch puts it (*l'effet de contexte*), in which Sultanate manuscript culture developed this emphasis on the visual and figural, and made the body its imagery's master sign, even in its Persianate corpus as we will discuss later in this chapter.<sup>41</sup> This ferment is the body-centric Indic compound that regrouped the rich and diversified non-Islamic and non-monotheistic cultures of South Asia going back as far as the Bronze Age (known as "Indus Valley civilization"). More precisely I wish to discuss a particular feature of this Indic lore that I term the "Indic metaphysics of the body." This feature constitutes an indispensable parameter of knowledge for the study of Indo-Islamic painting.

### **The Indic Metaphysics of the Body as a Parameter of Knowledge for the Study of Indo-Islamic Painting**

In the historiography of Indian painting in Islamic context, one may often find references to "the cultural ethos of India," or "the particular Indian milieu" as Eloise Brac de la Perrière writes in her study on Sultanate painting.<sup>42</sup> These designations refer to Indian polytheistic cultures and socio-religious practices involving the body, figures of the divine, and other forms of the Indic cultural substratum that are in many ways antinomic to Islam and with which the Muslims of Sultanate and Mughal India lived and negotiated.

This complex process of cultural negotiation has been illuminated by the socio-historical studies, but its aesthetic implications for the art of painting remain in need of critical investigation. Indeed, the presentation of this negotiation in the historiography of Indian painting focused on its sociological aspects has left aside the aesthetic logic connecting pre-Modern Sultanate and Mughal pictoriality with one another. Historians have shed light on the integration, adoption, and appropriation of Indic cultural habits by the

Mughals, such as the political ritual of the emperor's public appearing inspired by Hindu customs of kingship (*jharokha-I darshan*); as we know, this political ritual appears visualized in the particular placement of the imperial portrait in a balcony setting.<sup>43</sup> But this Indic-Mughal intersection in painting has not been examined from the metaphysical-aesthetic perspective, in particular through the projection of this perspective in pre-Modern Sultanate book art. In the latter, alongside the continuous making of Indic products, Indic aesthetic principles and philosophies of forms deeply informed and shaped the Sultanate visual expressions from which the Mughal politics of human representation derived. The gripping human figures in Sultanate imagery are indeed the prelude to Mughal figurations in general as these draw from a broad humanistic approach to the theme of Man and the body in the Indian pictorial scene. Pre-Modern Sultanate painting conveys therefore the aesthetic principle that distinguishes the imagistic language in the Indian-Islamic context from that of the Iranian world: the aesthetic principle of "recreating life out of life" by placing the focus on its main symbol, the human body.<sup>44</sup>

The Indic metaphysics of the body underpins this principle. It is the penetrating work of this metaphysics on the Sultanate consciousness that gave rise to this anthropocentric body-centric visuality in Indo-Islamic context before the Mughal advent, and that, with it, developed into new aspects and forms. To explicate this phenomenon, I have chosen the unusual method of cogitative reflection free from the technicalities of academic discourse. By "cogitative reflection" I mean a meditative mode of thinking whose validity relies on common knowledge as well as intuitions not always detailed by meticulous research, something on the order of a generalization and a navigation through ideas that do not require systematic support from precise results and examples. Although the type of thought thus produced might be sometimes perceived as cliché or appear as an abstract reverie, it constitutes a strategy of interpretation in its own right as it provides key supporting ideas for the remainder of this book's arguments and contentions.

#### CENTRALITY OF THE BODY IN INDIC VISUALITY

The theme of the human body forms a universal and fundamental socio-cultural construct and referent, whether it is approached through assertions or through suppression, placed at the center or at the periphery of a system of thought, or abstracted or concretized in artistic expression. In the subcontinent, the human body has always been the locus of representation for all kinds of corporealities, incarnations, and avatars in which imagistic strategies such as anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, and personification constitute powerful tools of metaphysical pronouncement. The figural products of these strategies have therefore formed a competitive counter-power to speech, language, and writing—in other words a visual, carnal countertext to text. A recent, rich

volume, *Images of the Body in India: South Asian and European Perspectives on Rituals and Performativity*, explores the multidimensional conceptions of the body and its plurifunctionality in the cosmopolite Indian milieu in diverse periods.<sup>45</sup> The essays investigate several philosophical approaches and socio-cultural practices involving the body both as a concept and a reality, the whole of which forms the Indian metaphysics of corporeality, with at its core the Indic conception of it.

In Indic India, thought and meaning are communicated through the visible, conveyed and substantiated in garlands of human and animal figurations, hybrid creatures, deities, and semi-deities, or performed in variegated ritualizations of the living body, individual or social bodies that all place corporeality, natural, nature-inspired, re-created, or imagined, at the very core of the aesthetic and cognitive experience. These Indic versatile apprehensions of the body construct what could be described as the “carnal aesthetics” of India whose quintessence is the art of dance.<sup>46</sup> The simplest existential thoughts, feelings, and emotions and likewise the most abstract and unfathomable philosophical concepts, such as “divine energy” or God’s body, express themselves in dance as well as in sculpted and painted images.<sup>47</sup> One might say that in Indic cultures the living body is the metaphysical mirror of the Indic world, and the images of corporealities in Indic arts form the mirror of this existential and spiritual body-mirror.

Art captures, encapsulates, and inscribes in the duration of time and the solidity of matter the ephemeral but breathing and fleshy morphologies that dancers transfigure with their transient bodies. As stipulated in the assertion of Vishnudharmottara in the *Citrasutra (Chitrasutra)*, a text predating the eighth century AD, “Without [knowledge] of the science of dancing, the rules of painting [and equally sculpture] are very difficult to understand.” Pratadaditya Pal, a contemporary expert of Indian culture, in commenting on this statement, said, “What is true is that without familiarity with the art of dance, one cannot express movement in either painting or sculpture.”<sup>48</sup>

Although these Indic constructions of bodies in the unanimated matter of art do not always display realistic modes of plastic expression, they are like dance, coextensive of living entities in Nature, almost organic re-creations of life out of life. As if born of living creatures, these images of corporealities are aesthetically bound to natural beings by a multifaceted relationship of interchangeability, substitution, transference, consubstantiation, transubstantiation, or transfiguration.<sup>49</sup> Above all, sculpture, the most physical, tactile, and tangibly transcendental of artistic media, dominates the Indic visual landscape of India.<sup>50</sup> In the full scope of its plastic possibilities in architecture, *ronde-bosse*, or relief, sculpture constitutes an equal but durable counterpart to the fleeting corporeality of dancing bodies. Indic architecture also is sculpture, a monumental sculpted body that comes in all sorts of vibrant morphologies of different sizes put together: a carnal architecture.<sup>51</sup>

Painting provides reflective images of the inextricable double reality of the living and sculpted body that shapes Indic visuality.

In Indic India, dancing bodies and their inorganic aesthetic variants and substitutes are imbued with a highly reifying power. They tell stories, visualize spiritualities, concretize abstractions, and substantialize idealities, thus constructing a multisensory aesthetics that entangles the real and the imaginary, the existential and the poetic, the phenomenal and the spiritual, and the abstract and the tangible. They shape and deliver what can be named in complementary symmetry with carnal aesthetics, a “carnal knowledge.”<sup>52</sup> The body thus constitutes the medium and substance of Indic visuality; it also forms the sign of an articulated code, in the linguistic semantic-semiotic sense. As with letters and words, corporeal shapes construct an alphabet configured in a tongue, but a tongue that can simultaneously tell, show, and incarnate. Consequently, in the Indic cultural space, the body is also logos: the carnal logos of India, a supra-powerful substitute for thought, speech, and text.

Furthermore, owing to its double textualizing and representational function, the body posits itself as a cultural matrix in Indic context.<sup>53</sup> In this, Indic cultures meet with equally body-dominated animist Africa, Ancient Greece, or Renaissance Europe, just to mention a few. And in this, these cultures set themselves apart from the logocentric Islamic Persianate and Arab worlds, in which visual forms, including figurative painting and body representation, are overwhelmingly submitted to the laws of verb, speech, and letter.<sup>54</sup> In the Persian world, the cosmic theories of the adepts of the Horufis’ religious sect, illustrate perfectly this general feature of the Islamic metaphysics of the body. The Horufi esoteric thinkers constructed a cosmogonic alphabet associating the human morphological properties to a system of letters and numbers that unites the materiality of the body to language, more precisely the sacred language of scripture premised on the primordial verbal gesture of corporeal creation by God’s interjection “Be.”<sup>55</sup>

This anthropocentric and mimetic cultural expression of Indic India, which activates carnal cognitive faculties and resonates in the existence of flesh, has caught, penetrated, and transmuted the aesthetic consciousness of all settlers and conquerors on the subcontinent, including the Muslims. All were to live it in their daily life and inevitably received its penetrating impact. It is within this inescapable Indic carnality that resides the secret of the vitalistic-mimetic shift in Sultanate pictorial aesthetics and the rise of realism in Mughal painting, both being intimately correlated.

To return to pictorial analysis, this new figural regime at the Sultanates’ court impacted the entire production, including the Persianate corpus, yet it originally drew from a conception of book art dominated by the graphic aesthetic of the written form. This phenomenon will be examined next, as it provides the backdrop of the Indo-Persian cross-pollination that occurred in the Mughal Empire after 1555.

### When the Old Bespeaks the New: Archaizing Persian Forms in Sultanate Painting

If, due to their belonging to the Indic lore, the *Chandayana* copies offer the clearest evidence of cultural formation and transformation, the Persianate corpus unexpectedly turns out to do so as well, with equal if not more clarity (Figs. 25–6). It is, more precisely, the archaism of forms characterizing this corpus that powerfully reveals these innovative changes in pre-Modern Sultanate pictorial representation. This is because, in this corpus's framework, these changes take on the consistency of a break away from the original Iranian reference in contrast with the alterations introduced in the group of Indic items that, one could say, creatively prolong an age-old tradition. Indeed, although these Indic items certainly point in new artistic directions, their pictoriality nevertheless remains connected with the past traditions from which they derive, as the human form was among their founding characteristics. In contradistinction, in the Persianate group, the innovative Sultanate aesthetic appears to provoke a certain alienation or even rupture with the original model as it was evolving in the Iranian arena. In fact, the Sultanates' artists and patrons seem to have shown little interest in the latest pictorial developments in coeval Iran, having instead preferred the maintenance of older Persian repertoires and manners. The common logic linking this choice and the innovations in question is to be determined. Interestingly, the phenomenon of archaic forms in the Persian repertoire was still lingering in the context of the Deccan in the last decades of the sixteenth century.<sup>56</sup>

To address the intriguing question of this antiquarianism, specialists have delved into the sociology of the Iranian diaspora within the artists' community in India but have neglected to seek the responses that a critical-aesthetic inquiry could also offer. The argument of the Persian diaspora's socio-politico-psychological issues of identity only partially explains this choice of outmoded Persian formulas. It fails to grasp the effect of the context of the local Indian artistic culture relying upon parameters of art conceptualization significantly different from those that framed art in the Persian world. Discussing these points will allow us to highlight further the generative role of the Indic matrix in Sultanate and early Mughal figurative representation.

#### WHO DID THE PERSIAN PICTORIAL ANTIQUARIANISM ADDRESS AND INTEREST?

The first point to examine concerns the agencies involved in this phenomenon of pictorial archaism. Above all, in Sultanate India the Persianizing illustrated books were not exclusively intended for customers of Iranian origin or culture. Eloise Brac de la Perrière could not be more correct when she cautions against establishing sharp divisions between religious communities in the Sultanates' cosmopolitan society, and consequently against drawing conclusions about

manuscript production and consumption in these polities based on religious-ethnic affiliations.<sup>57</sup> She appropriately quotes the example of a copy of the *Vasanta Vilasa* whose commissioner's name, written on the colophon, "Shah Sri Chandrapala, fils de Shah Sri Depala," bears some ambiguity regarding its exact ethnicity and faith allegiance. It is therefore expected that in such a context, favoring the intermingling of cultural interests and motivations, a non-Iranian or non-Muslim elite had developed a fondness for Persian artifacts and perhaps had participated in the sponsorship of this art as well. In addition, if one considers this particular elite a non-negligible agency in the dynamic of offer and demand that presided over the making of these objects, one cannot exclude the possibility that they might have played a part in the artistic conceptualization and production, as modest as it might have been. This remark leads me to argue a second point.

Since this type of consumer was unconcerned by a sense of belonging or identity issues related to Iran, potentially this consumer could have been more open and aesthetically sensitive to more innovative forms of Persian painting, therefore he or she could very well have stimulated an emulation of newer models. Yet, there was neither such an impulse nor such an emulation in the pre-Mughal Sultanates. Indeed, it appears this presumed "external" clientele's aesthetic choices and tastes aligned themselves with the patrons of Persian culture's leanings towards the antiquarian expression. This alignment, however, should not be read as proof of the negligible or nonexistent impact of this clientele on the conception of Sultanate painting of Persian facture, nor should it lead one to assume without reserve that this art was an exclusively intracultural Iranian affair. Instead, it should incite one to suspect the existence of aspirations, tastes, and sensitivities common to the diverse components of the Indian social complex, including both the Persianate population and other communities coexisting with it; shared tastes and sensitivities that this consensus on the Persian archaizing style would reflect. Since these convergences could not have resulted from a common Iranian sentiment, it then becomes clear their nature has to do with other concerns logically springing from what unites all these communities together—namely, the Indian cultural space. In other words, while the cultivation of the Iranian heritage, for reasons of identity and cultural attachment, certainly may have played a part in the making of the Sultanate-Persianate antiquarian construct, the role of non-Persian multicultural agencies cannot be overlooked. This consideration inevitably brings forth a third point: the aesthetic dimension of the phenomenon.

Although the most powerful agencies in the sponsorship of these artifacts had a Persian legacy to assert in the art's visual space, the environment of productivity itself was Indian. This feature of the production, an art displaced from its original area of creation and practiced in a different context,

necessarily implies that it would be impossible for it to evolve on the same terms, pace, and direction as it would in the motherland. Displacement entails a transformation that is not only within intentionality but also, importantly, beyond it and effected by the Indian context's impact. The Persian art of the book transferred to Sultanate India did not derogate from the rule. It did mutate into an expression different from its contemporary Persian counterpart not only because of its makers' intent to maintain traditional Persian forms but also because of active interference from the cultural surroundings. The meeting of these two forces, equally effective and in tight interaction, made the archaizing style the norm in Sultanate Persian painting. Stylistic traditionalism thus flourished under a double impulse: the Iranian diaspora's specific preoccupations with Persian legacies and, crucially, the adequacy of this picturing mode for the broad Sultanate vision of art, visuality, and aesthetics informed by the Indian cultural conglomerate. That vision of art, I have argued, sprang from the body-centered and vitalistic Indic visual landscape. No wonder then that the latest pictorial developments in Iran did not infiltrate the Sultanates' aesthetic consciousness. A brief account of these developments is necessary here before arguing further these ideas.

*UNSUITABLE DEVELOPMENTS OF PERSIAN PICTORIALITY FOR THE INDIAN EYE AND MIND*

Although the history of Persian painting is a well-established academic field, the narrative and appreciation of this art's evolution within different schools and stylistic currents has been questioned recently for good reason.<sup>58</sup> With this uncertain idea of Persian painting's history as a backdrop, the following broad outline reflects my perspective and understanding of this evolution, which is further examined in Chapter 4.

Since the inception of the Persian miniature in Iran and Iraq during the Ilkhanid period, a unique, distinctively Persian imagistic order steadily evolved and then flowered during the Timurid era. One could say it is this imagistic order that provided this art with the Persian aesthetic ipseity despite its conspicuous iconographic cosmopolitanism and the variety of regional productions.<sup>59</sup> Underway as early as the late fourteenth century, this imagistic order was the product of a deconstructivist aesthetic principle that had been subverting what I term "the iconographic normativity" that previously had regulated pictorial practice in Islam. An explanatory pause is necessary here to clarify what I mean by "deconstructivist" and "iconographic normativity."

The term "iconographic normativity," as I use it, designates the age-old normative system of figurative representation, common to many world cultures in different periods, that presents a scenes' setting, be it an architectural interior, landscape, cityscape, or any other element of narrative contextualization, as the framework and background of the human figure, thus posited as the main subject matter.<sup>60</sup> Medieval Arab painting, for example,

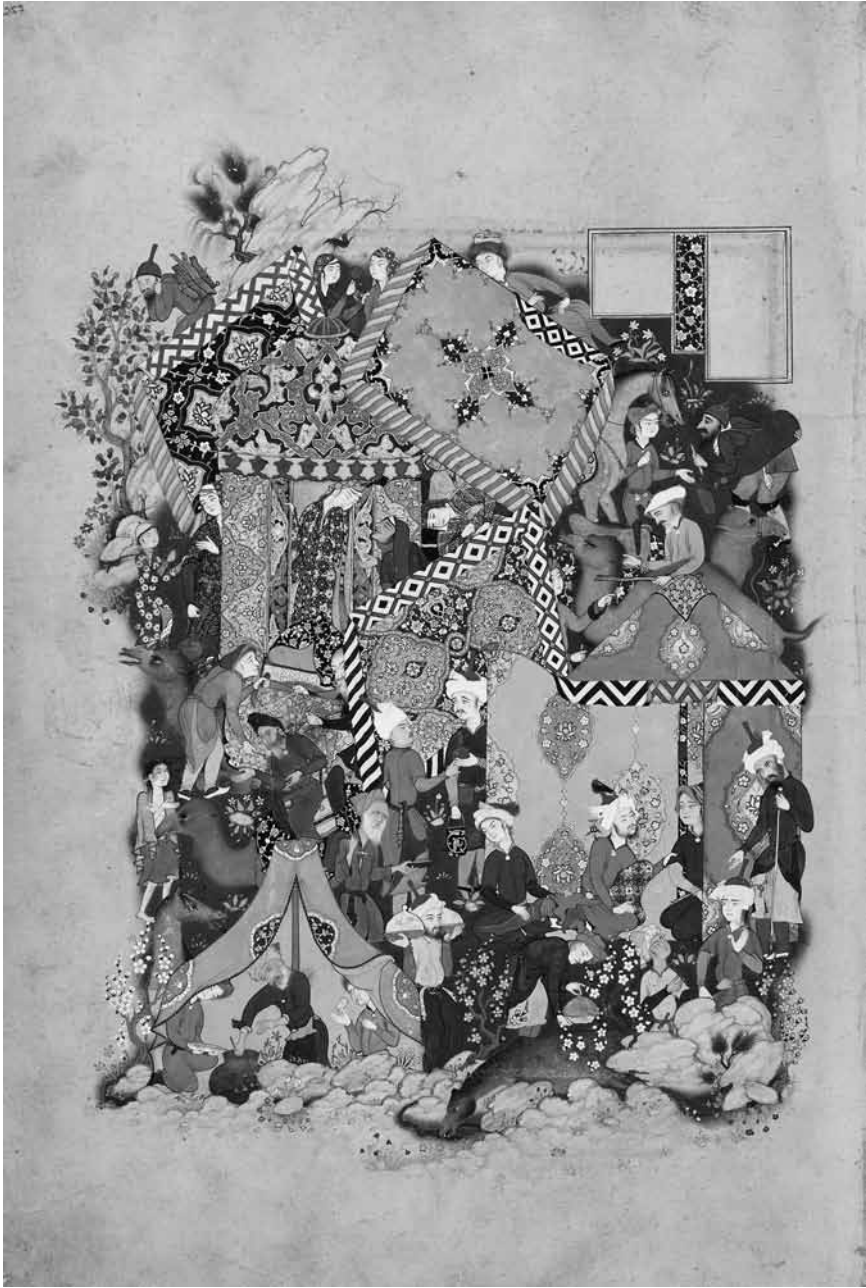
follows this model. As to the adjective “deconstructivist,” I borrowed it from the Derrida-anchored philosophy of the architecture of deconstruction called “deconstructivism”; deconstructivist art and architecture is represented in the work of Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid, and Frank Gehry.<sup>61</sup> But I am referring to deconstructivist architectural drawing in particular, which is more relevant to my propos as it is the closest artistic medium to book painting.<sup>62</sup>

In dismantling, fragmenting, and disfiguring the structures they represent, deconstructivist drawings, and likewise deconstructivist buildings, seek to defy functional logic in order to elevate architecture to a free mode of expression challenging the dictates of modernist minimalist and ultrafunctionalist architectural philosophy. The limitation that impossibility and irrationality impose in the implementation of deconstructivism owing to the constraining reality of building construction, yields to opportunity and possibility in the architectural drawing's virtual space. In the Persian pictorial context, the traditional representational scheme briefly described above that reflects basic human rationality had been progressively deconstructed by means of an unprecedented move in the history of painting in Islam. This move consisted in attributing equal autonomy of cognitive function and aesthetic status to both pictorial registers of the figures and their settings or contextualizing narrative elements (Figs. 1, 18, 28–30, 33, 37–8). This evolution led to the loss of age-old prerogatives that put the human figure at the center of a picture's conceptualization, arrangement, and rhetoric.<sup>63</sup>

In Persian works bearing signs of this development, as in some highly refined, late fourteenth-century Jalayirid paintings, the interchangeability between the animated and the unanimated attests to this reorganizing principle of aesthetic-semantic equality between all pictorial registers (Figs. 28, 33). This process can be observed in the anthropomorphic and zoomorphic rock formations or the kinetic landscapes endowed with the morphological finitude and inner aptitude to stretch and grow like an autonomous living entity, while conversely the human figures may morph into disembodied geometric objects. *Tableaux de nature*, architectural representations, geometrical patterns, and framing devices behave like independent bodies producing a narrative of their own, either in conjunction or in disjunction with both the human drama depicted and the correlating text. Thus given a full capacity to complicate, shape, and manipulate the picture's phenomenality, the setting acts as a co-figuration rather than a configuration. In this way the whole composition challenges and deconstructs the very idea of what a figurative image on a folio consists of, where it begins and where it ends, and what it stands for in the compound text-illustration. As a result, the figural construct's structural layout powerfully inflects the cognitivity and semantic of the picture which is no longer exclusively controlled by human representation and the narrative it produces.



28 *Birth of Zal*, attributed to Siyavush (c. 1536–1610), 1576–77. Qazvin, Iran. Folio from a *Shahname* (*Book of Kings*) by Abu'l Qasim Firdausi (935–1020). *Shahname* of Shah Isma'il II (r. 1576–77). Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper.  
 © 2000–2014 Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights reserved



29 *Majnun Approaches the Camp of Layla's Caravan*, from *Haft Awrang* by Jami, 1556–1565. Iran. Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC



30 *Allegory of the Celebrations for Akbar's Circumcision at Khwaja Seh Yaran*, attributed to Dust Muhammad, c. 1546, from *The Jahangir Album*, Kabul. Opaque watercolor on paper. Property of Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz

For example, in the illustration of a battle or a hunting scene, the chaos and drama may rely solely on the frenetic landscape while the abstract depiction of the human figures themselves appears subordinated to the setting's animated force. Such illustrations present spectacular visual effects such as ebullient vegetation or earth and rock formations surging from the stillness of the picture's textboxes or frames and spreading out over the folio's margins as if suddenly erupting. These active landscapes are the real actors of the drama and inscribe the reception of the image in the immediacy of the moment in which the story is told, producing a highly theatrical impact in the simultaneous double experience of the reading of the text and the visualization of its illustration. I will return to this specific ipseitic aspect of the Persian image, namely, its performativity, in Chapter 4.

This reinvented Persian conception of figurality approaching the human thematic as a part, but not necessarily the ontological nucleus of the picture, yielded, in the early Safavid era, to the creation of extraordinary deconstructivist complexities in which abstract or surrealist patterns and geometrical forms swallow or literally dislocate the figuration (Figs. 1, 29). For instance, in folios illustrating scenes of a desert encampment as in episodes of the story of Layla and Majnun, rock formations and tent accessories project strongly optical geometries and hyperkinetic forms that constitute the scene's protagonists just as the figures themselves. One may say that these elements even subdue human representation or submit them to their aesthetic order (Fig. 29).

Such an aesthetic projects in the pictorial field a metaphysics of quintessentially poetic-imaginary order in which human representation belongs to a larger, transhuman construct. That is precisely the reason it failed to penetrate Sultanate pictoriality. While both Persian and Sultanate painting resort to abstract styles, conceptually and metaphysically the deconstructivist Persian order is fully antinomic to the Sultanate imagistic philosophy promoting the tangibility and palpability of a vitalist, anthropocentric, and body-centric visual language.<sup>64</sup> It is worth insisting here that the Sultanate focus on the human form and mimetic inclination mostly relied on stylizing and abstractive pictorial modes; hence this imagery has not been identified as a "self-world-fusion" pictoriality.<sup>65</sup> In a field that still tends to confuse distinct aesthetic concepts and operations (such as conceptualization of the image and stylistic modalities, and the generic notion of *mimesis* and its particular variants such as faithful imitation), the philosophy of an anthropocentric visuality that is in essence imitative can only be expressed by means of stylistic realism or naturalism.<sup>66</sup> Sultanate painting proves that this is incorrect.

*THE SULTANATE APPROACH TO PERSIAN PAINTING*

The conceptual underpinnings observed across the spectrum of pre-Modern Sultanate manuscripts can now be investigated further in focusing on the subgroup of fifteenth-century Persian artifacts—that is, the very group that should have shown the impact of pictorial novelties from contemporary Iran, had they fit the Indian conception of visuality and pictoriality. But these works do not feature anything close to the transhuman and deconstructivist plasticity that had been developing in the Iranian world since the fourteenth century (Figs. 25–6). Instead, they carefully abide by older or antiquarian Persian models that did not provide setting and framing devices with such intense ontological and expressive power. The choice of not only an archaizing Persian iconography but also a purely plastic interpretation of it signals a deliberate intent to submit this artwork to a basic world-fusion or mimetically oriented type of figurative expression. The choice of palette, for example, is highly significant in this process. Usually more colorful than the rest of the thematic, figures stand out against the duller or plainer background tones, the structure of which is comparatively understated, less active, and distractive than in most coeval innovative Persian models. In thus preserving the human figure as the main subject matter by which the picture (not necessarily the content) reflects cognitively, if not stylistically a relation of proximity with the real, the Sultanate Persian illustrations stand out from the otherworldly universe that mainstream Persian painting had become in Iran.<sup>67</sup>

Viewed from this perspective of aesthetic analysis, the non-integration of the latest Persian paradigms in Sultanate painting appears as a response to particular Sultanate leanings toward a mimetic, vitalistic pictorial metaphysics that the outmoded Persian forms could best express. At the same time and for this very reason, this antiquarianism powerfully evidences the rise of the new body-centered imagistic idiom in pre-Mughal India, thus inaugurating an Indo-Persianate countercurrent in the Persian pictorial mainstream. In that respect, Sultanate book art definitely appears as the potent precursor of Mughal painting that, owing to its plastic realism, is instead traditionally viewed as the first, most dissident countercurrent emerging from the Persian pictorial matrix. This implies two very important things.

First, before the Mughals engaged in a deconstruction of the Persian paradigm by introducing mimetic devices into the picture, the artists and patrons of the pre-Mughal Sultanates had initiated the key process subtending this deconstructive move based on their own portrayal of this paradigm—namely, the slippage from *poesis* to *mimesis* in the image's aesthetic.<sup>68</sup>

Second, the world-fusion conception of representation that distinguishes Mughal pictoriality so conspicuously from other early Modern Persianate schools is undoubtedly an outcome of the Sultanate legacy, and definitely not of the so-called influence of European art. However, within the Mughal

context the deviation from the Persian course of pictorial events would take on more sophisticated forms and complicated turns, since, unlike in the Sultanate era, this time the newest Persian models made their way to the subcontinent. With the Mughals, the Indian book art's framework could not go without changes. The creation of an unprecedented centralizing and confederating Islamic power, the Mughal Empire, naturally modified the conditions of artistic productivity, particularly those of the transcultural phenomenon that sees a shift of hybridizing modalities and philosophy, from eclecticism to syncretism.

### **The Akbari Era: New Logistics of Pictorial Productivity, New Philosophy and Practice of Hybridization**

Taught the art of painting and drawing from a young age, Akbar acquired an unconditional love for pictures, which he consistently sponsored throughout his life. But what really promoted the spectacular development of Akbari painting was the considerable means at his disposal to fulfill his passion on a grand scale. In the expanding Mughal Empire, a greater mobilization of resources and workers allowed artistic creation to attain another level of technicity and material possibility. The newly restructured imperial *kitabkhana* became a cultural infrastructure more powerful than ever, gathering impressive numbers of artists, most of them non-Muslim Indians from different locations who would work under the lead of Safavid masters Mir Sayyid 'Ali and 'Abdul-Samad, and soon joined by other artists from the Persian world coming to find work in India.<sup>69</sup> The size of the paintings and their profuse aesthetics bespeak this new imperial grandeur and growing artistic economy; a dynamic of centralized production that did not diminish but enhanced the patronage of the nobles and provincial gentry (Figs. 5–6, 11–12, 20–21). It is logical then that with these new circumstances of productivity, the parameters of pictorial practice underwent transformation.

New logistics and technicalities signified new desires. Apart from the will to achieve social cohesion through cultural synthesis, argued throughout the scholarly literature, another highly transformational factor in this evolutionary process was the aspiration for something unprecedentedly sublime, for a unique, superlative aesthetic ideal that would visually translate and univocally convey the grandeur and scope of the Mughals' power and culture in the newly established empire. In terms of dynastic representativeness, the preexisting Sultanate pictorial models operated by means of cultural, literary, and philosophical reference but not, it seems, by means of a specific, courtly semiotic and rhetoric of visual ostentation. Therefore, if these Sultanate models stimulated the creation of a new language of forms in painting, they nevertheless could not adequately serve this particular desire. Nor could the

Sultanate eclectic aesthetic appropriately reflect the psyche of the Mughal governing class, preoccupied with the construction of a highly distinct cultural identity that, albeit ecumenical and assembling, was also fundamentally centered and concentrated on the cultivation of the Timurid legacy. The Sultanate pictorial expression, diffracted in terms of ends and ideals, and pointing to a constellation of cultural horizons in a kind of conflagration of times and spaces, appears rather unfitting to project in visuality the Mughal imperial aura and ipseity. This kind of inadequacy supplied a powerful pretext to artistic manipulation, let alone the obvious stimulus engendered by competition in the cultural arena with the two rival empires of the Safavids and the Ottomans whose art exuded grandiosity through optical splendor and artistic virtuosity.

These new aspirations logically prompted a quest for more spectacular and sophisticated forms in painting that could match in visual wondrousness, formal virtuosity, and technical mastery the marvels made at the Persian and Ottoman courts. In fact, Humayun was sufficiently impressed by the extraordinary work he had seen at Shah Tahmasp's court to take under his protection Safavid painters and promote them as masters of *kitabkhana*. As Akbar did not seem to show a markedly different appreciation of Persian pictoriality, one may safely say the Safavid example became this new supreme inspirational ideal at this stage in the evolution of Mughal painting. The question of the centrality of the Safavid paradigm and more broadly that of the prominence of the latest Persian models in the Akbari painting's rich array of forms has been addressed in the scholarly literature. However, the corollary question of the aesthetic articulation between the distinct Indian and Persian pictorialities subtending the adaptive application of these Persian models has been approached with unsatisfactory, iconography-based traditional methods that are often more descriptive than analytical and, again, full of affect.<sup>70</sup>

#### *ALLURING IMPERIAL PAINTING ACCORDING TO THE SAFAVID PARAGON*

Although variegated in terms of stylistic expression, the courtly production under Akbar's patronage presents cohering conceptual and aesthetic properties that could be characterized with these sensitive words by Jane Austen, "and the whole was now so blended together, so harmonized by distance."<sup>71</sup> One of these properties is easily discernable in that it produces a first impression on the viewer: the impression of a shared allure or "a look" recognizable in a cluster of generic plastic features typical of the Safavid miniature. Those features include an all-over filling of the painted surface, vertical figural unfolding on the pictorial plane, dramatic effects of forms, trespassed frames, a finely nuanced palette sometimes enhanced with gold, complicated geometric imbrications, greatly detailed settings of the scenes, hyperkineticism, large formats of the folios, and so on.<sup>72</sup>



31 *Babur Marches from Kabul to Hindustan in 1507* (recto); text (verso), folio from a *Baburnama*, 1589–1590. Mughal India. Opaque watercolor, gold, and ink on paper. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The degree of faithfulness to the Persian pictorial aesthetic varies considerably depending on the training and cultural background of the Indian artists working alongside those of Iranicate extraction. Still, the general dynamic of the Mughal imperial creation in this period appears definitely oriented toward this same ultimate direction to produce riveting visual effects and a flamboyant opticality analogous to the Safavid pictorial expression. I call this process of submitting the images' design to the Safavid aesthetic order "overall Safavid alluring." It confers upon those imperial works perceptual qualities of lyricism and gloriousness sustained by a technical virtuosity in detail renderings, particularly the finesse of the drawing.

The use of the verb "alluring," however, points to a specific use of the Safavid paradigm that plays an essential role in the Mughal approach to Persian miniature. "Alluring" designates the act of fashioning an object to give it an "overall look" in conformity with general formal principles set up by a selected model. Yet, "alluring" is distinct from "copying" or even "imitating" inasmuch as it implies no more than a degree of resemblance to the chosen model. For the alluring process operates only at the surface of things. Often the similarities observed at first glance mutate into dissemblance upon close viewing. Ultimately, the differences may overwhelm the similarities or the latter may just produce an effect of illusion of resemblance. By deduction, if the phenomenon of giving images an allure according to Safavid criteria signals their conceptual prevalence and inspirational power, it also reveals that considerable space was left for interpretation and manipulation, and crucially, for the local traditions to continue to be a full part of the creative process. A preliminary reflection can be made based on this simple observation.

#### *INTEGRATIVE AND ADAPTIVE MODALITIES OF PICTORIAL HYBRIDIZATION*

The positing of a dominant paragon in the imperial *kitabkhana* marks a discontinuity within the continuity with the Indian pre-Mughal art of painting, as it signifies the adoption of new parameters in the practice of hybridization. The imperial project of a sublime pictoriality had indeed created the necessity of a more adaptive synthesis of the heterogeneous plastic vocabulary in order to craft a visual metalanguage capable of constructing a Mughal equivalent of the admired yet external Safavid paragon. Judging only by the overall appearance of Akbari imperial paintings, it is clear this conceptual restructuring of pictorial activity under the guidance of Safavid masters imposed narrower standards than in the pre-Mughal Sultanates' period. Between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, one observes a steady evolution of the hybrid condition of paintings from eclecticism to syncretism in which impossible ensembles have become compossible syntheses, and diffracted multiplicities more stable consistencies, leading over time to symbiotic unities<sup>73</sup> (Figs. 5–6, 11–12, 20–21).

More concretely, while the Sultanates fragmented and compartmentalized the pictorial production into separate differential series and singularities, disjunctively assembled according to distinct topics, styles, and cultural origins (most often realized by the practitioners specialized in each category), by contrast Akbari imperial miniatures overall present qualities of unique pictorial expression and collaborative work.<sup>74</sup> The fluid application of various existing styles to the illustration of texts of different genres, battle scenes, mythological-religious themes, domestic tableaux, and so on, was instrumental to this new Mughal conception of symbiotic hybridness. The divergent “visualities” of the Sultanates, relatively homogeneous and often non-hybrid from the inside while appearing strongly hybrid from the outside, yielded to a more integrative hybridism tending to confine the sharply contrasting effects of the aesthetic hybridity’s disparity inside the images.<sup>75</sup>

Then one may imagine that a similar developmental path had already begun at the Mughal court in Northern India in the pre-exile years. The late Timurid models imported by the Mughals to their newly established polity might have initiated a significant reorientation of local pictorial modalities toward a syncretism premised upon the promotion of the Timurid aesthetic ideal. But again, with no surviving Indo-Mughal artifacts from this period, one remains in the realm of conjecture. Nonetheless, the Mughal reformulation of the local hybridizing practice attested to by Akbari art entailed a major novelty in the images’ structure—namely, the engagement of the organizing principle of the visual syntax, defined below and examined in Chapter 4.

#### *THE PRINCIPLE OF THE VISUAL SYNTAX*

Syntax, by definition a shaping device, has the ability to modify and augment or, on the contrary, to reduce eclectic items’ original properties and meanings. More tightly bound together and interdependent from one another by their syntactical order, the syncretistic configuration’s components necessarily undergo a significant alteration, particularly a decreasing or sometimes loss of their self-signifying power; a faculty that the heterogeneous components of impossible ensembles such as those of the pre-Modern Sultanate hybrid corpus usually keep rather intact. In return, through this very alteration and the weakening of their autonomy, the components become more interactive and intersective with one another, mutually transformational one might say. In Akbari miniatures, it is through synergetic interactivity with the late Timurid-Safavid sophisticated pictorial grammar that the inherited Sultanate repertoire found a way to renew itself; although conversely, the latter allowed the former to reinvent itself into a new artistic idiom. The visible results of this syntax have been described in terms such as these: “Under Akbar’ s attentive eye, a highly expressive style of painting quickly developed, combining Persian technical finesse with Indian vitality and feeling for nature.”<sup>76</sup>

Art historians uniformly describe the Indian palette, the vigor of the scenes, the lively rendering of the human and animal figures, and other plastic details resulting from the Indianization of the Persian forms, soon accompanied by the integration of European forms.<sup>77</sup> At the interpretive level, the mainstream explanation of this Indo-Persian aesthetic cross-pollination revolves around the narrative of the Mughal strategy of cultural synthesis for the pragmatic purpose of stabilizing and legitimizing the empire in the highly cosmopolitan Indian context.<sup>78</sup>

However, these stylistic descriptions, iconographic decipherments, and sociological contextualizations do not suffice to explain these complex processes of hybridization. An unaddressed area in the studies concerns these syntactical operations in early Akbari painting, which empowered, rather than disempowered, the Sultanate aesthetic legacy, owing to, not despite, the heavy re-Persianization of the images in this early period. To fill this void, attention should be given to the chiasm between the body-centric and mimetically inclined Sultanate pictorial aesthetic and the idealistic transhuman constructs of Persian miniature. This chiasm or frictional intersectionality between the Indian body-centric and Persian logocentric aesthetic metaphysics constitutes the foundation of the Mughal painting's aesthetic ontology and its anthropocentric imagery.

### **Indo-Persian Hybridism as Foundation of the Mughal Pictorial Ontology**

The earliest works commissioned by Akbar, such as the *Hamzanama* (*Tales of Amir Hamza*) or the *The Anvār-i Suhailī* (*Lights of Canopus*) represent the key phase of Indo-Persian hybridization in the Mughal pictorial becoming that predates the momentous meetings with the Jesuits during the three missions of 1580, 1591 and 1595 at the Mughal court, a period marked overall by a more intense exposure to European forms and techniques<sup>79</sup> (Figs. 5, 21). Early works produced around the 1560s and 1570s attest to the inventive adaptation of the post-exile Persian imports to the local pictorial substrata that include the unknown Mughal cross-cultural production of the pre-exile period. By now, this Akbari hybrid art can visibly and unambiguously be categorized as a uniquely "Mughal" expression.

In accordance with our reading of the early Mughal artistic unfolding, the Mughal metaphysical apprehension of the image as scene of projection of reality or as the conveyor of a mimetically inclined visuality, derives from the pre-Mughal Indian conception of the fictive forms of art as coextensions of those in Nature, even when imaginary stories and otherworldly mythologies are represented. Plastic realism, the feature that distinguishes Mughal painting from other Persianate productions, rests upon and springs from the Sultanate vitalistic principle of consubstantiality binding the living body

to its image in the aesthetic space. This intimate and profound correlation beyond stylistic specificities between the pre-Mughal and Mughal pictoriality signifies that “the appearance in the subcontinent of an [Akbari] exciting new style,” to paraphrase Susan Stronge, marked by plastic mimesis, is actually less the product of an emergence than the outcome of a long gestation. This outcome corresponds to the Akbari developments based on the preexisting Indian visual language that the experimentation with the newly imported Persian forms helped bring forth.<sup>80</sup>

With the historical conjuncture bringing in addition the foreign influx of European art in the sixteenth century, another pool of repertoires and techniques to experiment with had then been supplied. On this latter point, it is of the utmost importance to underscore that the interaction with Europe constitutes a distinct episode in the construction of the Mughal pictorial syncretism. Let us re-assert, the energy and drama, the anthropocentrism and the hybridism, not simply circumstantial, but as an explorative and adaptive aesthetic philosophy and conscious strategy of creation, all these elements pertain to the Sultanate tradition and now presented new appearances, forms, and properties in Akbari painting. These appearances, forms, and properties were precisely the result of this syntactical articulation between the conceptually divergent Persian and Indian pictorial idioms.

#### *TENSION BETWEEN TWO IMAGISTIC CONCEPTIONS*

The understanding of this complex mechanism of syntactical articulation runs into a difficulty posed by the Akbari syncretism’s polarity and all the paradoxes and ambiguities it produces in the picture. Clearly, in many ways Akbari painting breaks away from the Persian prototypes despite the phenomenon of allure discussed above. The studies highlight the stylistic contrasts provoked by the coexistence of the so-described manneristic grace and decorative effects of the Persianate manners and the vitality and naturalistic tendency of the Indian picturing mode.<sup>81</sup> Complex, contrasting forms also characterize book art in Jahangir and Shah Jahan’s reign (Figs. 3, 7–8, 17, 39). Ebba Koch observed that two “antithetical stylistic modes” or “conflicting tendencies” mark Shahjahani imagery<sup>82</sup> (Figs. 8, 13–14). Basically, in these Mughal hybrid images what puzzles experts is the bipolarity of aesthetic metaphysics that this coexistence of Indian and Persian pictorial languages designs, and that the paintings’ stylistic duality signals. And as the Persian idealistic conception opposes the Indian naturalistic inclination aiming to reframe the representation in the realm of concrete existence, expectedly, dialectic tensions are plentiful in the Akbari illustrations. It is precisely this metaphysical polarity and dialectic of Akbari pictoriality that call for explanation now.

In a cultural space in which mixing forms of multiple sources constituted a true painting philosophy and a valued asset, this aesthetic polarization only reflects a double constructive process of negotiation of oppositional dualities and harmonization of constitutive disharmonies. How then have the antagonistic aesthetic workings of the two imagistic modes, equally appreciated and embraced by the Mughal aesthetic consciousness, been negotiated? And how did the Mughals address the conflict between the two impossible aesthetic desires (a priori mutually exclusive) of, on the one hand following the pictorial modalities dictated by the otherworldly transhuman Persian plasticity, and on the other hand, pursuing the project of constructing a mimetic and anthropocentric visual idiom?

*THE MUGHAL RATIONALIZATION OF THE IMAGE'S METAPHYSICS*

To find a way through this dilemma and negotiate the dissonance, a careful choice of syntactical strategies had to be made, based on a prioritization of the Persian and Mughal antinomical conceptions of the image's metaphysics. One desire had to be given priority to enable the creation of the Mughal imagistic system—that is, the laying of the conceptual foundations of an iconicity that could express the Mughal gaze upon the world, the Mughal cultural optics in the paintings' visuality. Thus, which one of the two desires was given priority in the process of conceptualization of the picture?

The answer would seem a priori rather straightforward. Aside from the evidence of the overall prevailing Persian allure of the Akbari imperial artifacts, the historical data would easily lead one to think the Persian conception of iconicity was the most logical choice and was the guiding principle of Akbari pictoriality, a view assumed by many scholars. Safavid painters joined by other masters from the Persianate world outside India were in charge of the imperial *kitabkhana*, the Mughal House originated from the Timurid world impregnated with a Mongol-Turkic-Persian culture that had long been ardently cultivated, Safavid pictorial aesthetic had been posited as the supreme paradigm, Persian was the official language of the Mughal court, and so on.

And yet, first, such an interpretation does not take into account the transformational process of the Mughals' immersion in the Indo-Muslim milieu, while it assumes that the Persian culture they brought to India could remain omnipotent, significantly impacting the local cultural substratum rather than the other way around.

Secondly, this interpretation does not fully grasp the nature of the images as conveyers of an aesthetic metaphysics defined by a rational logic despite the adoption of many aspects and patterns of the Persian idealistic modes of picturing. This shortcoming stems from a misunderstanding of the aesthetic status of style which I have already touched upon, and that I will evoke each

time the discussion forces me to bring it forth. In art an allure, a look, a style, or a form's immediate appearance is not to be equated with the conceptual order that constructs the cognitive status and ontological definition of the image. Many art theorists have explored this fundamental point of art ontology; for example, Alphonse de Waelhens's concise definition is as follows: "Style is not an end, and even less a means of representation: it is a mode of approach. It has no existence outside this commerce with the world seen by the painter, and its mission is to present it by expressing it."<sup>83</sup>

In Akbari painting, the Safavid allure attests to the paradigmatic status of the Persian pictorial scheme, its role of "muse" so to speak, but by no means does this fact guarantee that the Persian imagistic vision took the lead in the ontological founding of Akbari representation. For to note another simple theoretical truth, positing a pictorial model and then painting using that model constitute two distinct procedures that may yield or stimulate all sorts of interpretations motivated by all sorts of objectives not necessarily identical to those that produced the model itself. The imitative or alluring endeavor may more or less respect the model's aesthetic integrity or take more liberty and deconstruct it, and this does include extreme acts such as distortion, disfiguration, or severing any conceptual linkage with the paragon. The traces of the model may remain more or less visible or recognizable in the work, but the object it has inspired may eventually differ greatly from it, just as the paintings of the British artist Francis Bacon after the portraits of Innocent X by Diego Velasquez, or Picasso's *eaux-fortes* after this master or Francisco Goya fundamentally differ from their original source of inspiration. In the case of the Mughals, one must seek the exact modalities of appropriation of the Persian paradigm not only in the iconography and style but also in the image's conceptual structure, which equally confers meaning.

In ending this chapter and introducing the next, I will briefly present the most distinctive element of Mughal painting that is pivotal to the hermeneutics of its conceptual structure—namely, human representation.

The Mughal naturalistic approach to this topic is an indication of Mughal pictoriality's mimetic foundation. This implies that mimesis has constituted the primal objective of the Akbari pictorial project and that the desire of emulating Persian plasticity was met only on the condition of submitting it to the Indian conception focused on the human form. In fact, the latter governs the visual rhetoric of Akbari painting generally, even though it also borrows and lavishly explores the complexity of Persian-inspired settings. In pieces showing the full impact of the Safavid manner, as in some of the profuse imagery of the *Hamzanama*, the luxurious depictions of nature and architecture may invade the pictorial field, yet they do not subdue the scenes' protagonists as in their Persian counterparts (Figs. 5–6, 11–12, 20–21, 28–31, 34). The natural distinction between the human presence and its environment tends to be aesthetically stipulated or sometimes firmly asserted.

Empowered with unprecedented imitative plastic qualities, Akbari human representation refers to the lived reality more tangibly than ever before in the Indo-Islamic context. Owing to new interest in the technical realization of more individualized faces, more fleshy bodies, and suppler bodily movement, the figures became more naturalistic than vitalistic. They appear animated by a centripetal force capable of counterbalancing the scopic attraction produced by the tide of Persian iconographic intricacies and flat geometrical patterns inherently tending to submerge or subordinate the scenes' protagonists. This combination of forces often succeeds in preserving the figures' faculty of lending an image a certain degree of verisimilitude. Consequently, in Akbari art, the human form took to a more concrete level the tendency toward plastic mimesis that, in pre-Modern Sultanate painting, was in a state of tension or latency rather than realization, that is, in a conceptual or symbolic state.

Even more, the expression of Sultanate human-centered representation culminated in the Akbari period with the emergence of physiognomic portraiture (Fig. 10). From appearing visceral and vitalistic but still abstract, symbolic, or archetypal in the Sultanate pictorial context, under Akbar's reign the human form not only took the verisimilar appearance of a being of flesh but also eventually turned into a represented individual with a characterized face: it had become somebody's body. This description, however, does not imply any progress or advancement in quality. It simply exposes the evolutionary curvature of the successive artistic events between the pre-Mughal and early Mughal eras in India, and thereby underscores the inscription of the art of the Mughal portrait in the consummate Indian practice of constructing body-centered visualities.

Yet, unlike previous Sultanate settings, under Akbar, in the imperial Persianized paintings, the rhetoric of human representation operates in a challenging pictorial environment characterized by a great deal of dialectic friction and movement, to the extent of a hyper-dialectic. This last remark commands a return to the question of the Mughal pictorial syntax by which the antithetical Persian and Indian idioms manage to achieve a certain symbiotic unity incorporating idealistic forms within a world-fusion imagistic construct.

## Notes

- 1 For details on the history of early Mughal painting, see Laura E. Parodi and Bruce Wannell, "The Earliest Datable Mughal Painting"; Laura E. Parodi et al., "Tracing the History of a Mughal Album Page in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art"; Laura E. Parodi, "Humayun's Sojourn at the Safavid Court," in *Proceedings of the 5th Conference of the Societas Iranologica Europaea*, vol. II, ed. Antonio Panaino and Riccardo Zipoli (Milan: Mimesis, 2006), 135–57; Abolala Soudavar, "Between the Safavids and the Mughals: Art and Artists in Transition," *Iran* 37 (1999): 49–66; Francis Richard, "An Unpublished Manuscript

from the Atelier of Emperor Humāyūn, the *Khamsa* Smith-Lesouëf 216 of the Bibliothèque Nationale,” in *Confluence of Cultures: French Contributions to Indo-Persian Studies*, ed. Françoise ‘Nalini’ Delvoye (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995), 37–53; Chahryar Adle, “New Data on the Dawn of Mughal Painting and Calligraphy,” in *Making of Indo-Persian Culture: Indian and French Studies*, ed. Muzaffar Alam, Françoise ‘Nalini’ Delvoye, and Marc Gaborieau (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000), 167–222; Sheila Canby, ed., *Humayun’s Garden Party: Princes of the House of Timur and Early Mughal Painting* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1994).

- 2 Here is a historical summary of Humayun’s exile: In 1540, the Afghan usurper Sher Shah Suri defeated the Mughal emperor at the battle of Kannauj, forcing him to flee Northern India. In 1543 he took refuge at Shah Tahmasp’s court in Iran. With the latter’s help he succeeded in regaining his authority in 1545, in Kabul, where he established his base for a decade before reconquering his territories in India in 1555. In Kabul, an old center of Timurid culture since Ulugh Beg that his father Babur, the Mughal dynasty’s founder, had ruled before his Indian conquests, Humayun sponsored a painting workshop from which rare works have survived. During his sojourn in Iran, Humayun had experienced the dazzling Safavid miniature and took under his wing two Safavid painters, Mir Sayyid ‘Ali and ‘Abd Al-Samad who followed him upon his return to India. However, Humayun died suddenly in 1556. The retinue of Persianate masters he had gathered around him continued to work in the imperial ateliers under the patronage of his son and successor Akbar. See Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot, *India Before Europe* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chapters 4 and 5, 84–151.
- 3 Laura E. Parodi and Bruce Wannell, “The Earliest Datable Mughal Painting,” in the section headed “Historical Contextualization: Humayun’s Patronage of Painting,” [www.asianart.com/articles/parodi/index.html](http://www.asianart.com/articles/parodi/index.html).
- 4 To date, the best inclusive account of the book art of this period is that of Eloise Brac de la Perrière, *L’art du livre dans l’Inde des sultanats*. It highlights the many historical questions raised by these eclectic artifacts. On the question of the transmission and recycling of books from one era to another see John Seyller’s interpretation of the manuscript *Tutinama*, once attributed to Akbar’s patronage. Seyller redated this item to pre-Mughal times, in John Seyller, *Pearls of the Parrot of India: The Walters Art Museum Khamsa of Amir Khrusraw of Delhi* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), and “Overpainting in the Cleveland Tuti nama,” *Artibus Asiae*, Museum Rietberg Zurich/Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution LII (1992): 283–318. X-rays show that Mughal artists repainted pre-Mughal paintings. On the practice of refurbishing collected artifacts, common in the Persianate world generally, see the case study by Mika Natif, “The SOAS Anvar-I Suhayli: The Journey of a ‘Reincarnated Manuscript,’” *Muqarnas* 25 (2008): 331–58.
- 5 Susan Stronge, *Painting for the Mughal Emperor*, 30. In *L’art du livre dans l’Inde des Sultanats*, Brac de la Perrière manages to put some order in this “chaotic” collection of items. She meticulously classifies them in stylistic categories and provides details about the iconography’s various provenances from Hindustan, Iran, Central Asia, China, and Arab lands. Using the same method, she surveys primary sources that deliver only meager information regarding the making of illustrated books in this era of Indian-Islamic art history. Although it focuses

more specifically on the Deccan and does not target painting in particular, see also *The Visual World of Muslim India: The Art, Culture and Society of the Deccan in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Laura Parodi (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), which covers diverse aspects of Indian multiculturalism between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries.

- 6 See Eloise Brac de la Perrière's conclusion in *L'art du livre dans l'Inde des sultanats*, 255–62. When they are not reduced to stylistic reminiscences, the continuities between the cultures of the Mughals and the Sultanates are left in the vagueness of generalizations, as in Vatsyayan's statement, "Mughal art is neither imitatively Persian nor a direct continuation of early medieval traditions." In *A Mirror of Princes: The Mughals and the Medici*, 4.
- 7 Eloise Brac de la Perrière quotes John Seyller's findings in "Overpainting in the Cleveland Tuti nama," 294, in *L'art du livre dans l'Inde des sultanats*, 260. See her conclusion on this matter in 260–61.
- 8 See Mika Natif, "Explaining Early Mughal Painting: The Anvar-i-Suhayli Manuscripts" (PhD diss., New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, 2006), E.Thesis OCLC Number 82371295, and her article, "The SOAS Anvar-I Suhayli: The Journey of a 'Reincarnated Manuscript.'" See also Margaret Richardson, "Synthesis and Symbiosis: Akbar's Aesthetic Vision for India," *Virginia Review of Asian Studies* (2010): 181–93, <http://virginiareviewofasianstudies.com/archives2010.shtml>. This essay focuses on stylistic and historical issues but underscores the important impact of the Rajput schools in Akbari painting, in particular in sub-imperial manuscripts, in contradistinction with mainstream thought, which usually emphasizes the reverse process of the Mughal shaping of Rajput painting.
- 9 In "The Earliest Datable Mughal Painting," Laura Parodi shows well how this scholarly narrative is constructed.
- 10 The translation is mine: "Quel lien unit par exemple le Hamza Name moghol d' Akbar à celui des sultanats? Rien, si ce n'est le texte même." Eloise Brac de la Perrière, *L'art du livre dans l'Inde des sultanats*, 259.
- 11 This portion of the sentence is extracted from "Gilles Deleuze," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: "puissance is the ability to affect and to be affected, to form assemblages or consistencies, that is, to form emergent unities that nonetheless respect the heterogeneity of their components. (Here we see the empiricist theme of the 'externality of relations': in an assemblage or consistency, the 'becoming' or relation of the terms attains its own independent ontological status. In Deleuze's favorite example, the wasp and orchid create a 'becoming' or symbiotic emergent unit.)" <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/deleuze/>.
- 12 Partially destroyed, this famous piece at the British Museum was later repainted under Jahangir's patronage (r. 1605–27). See *Humayun's Garden Party: Princes of the House of Timur and Early Mughal Painting*.
- 13 See Chahryar Adle, "Les artistes nommés Düst-Muhammad au XVIe siècle," *Studia Iranica* 22, 2 (1993): 226–35.
- 14 The style of the painting and its iconography are studied in detail by Parodi in the section headed "The Painting," in "The Earliest Datable Mughal Painting."

- 15 It is worth noting that Laura Parodi is currently working on proving her hypothesis about Mughal novelties in Humayuni painting. Until there is solid critical-aesthetic evidence that indeed a new art was created beyond iconographic changes, those paintings remain fundamentally the product of local Afghan-Persianate book art. The presence of Mughal figures and narratives in this art signals a change of patronage and iconographic content but not of pictorial idiom.
- 16 See Eloise Brac de la Perrière's conclusion in *L'art du livre dans l'Inde des sultanats*, 260, and Francis Richard, "An Unpublished Manuscript from the Atelier of Emperor Humāyūn," 41.
- 17 See Barbara Brend, *Muhammad Juki's Shahnamah of Firdausi* (London: Royal Asiatic Society and Philip Wilson Publishers, 2010). A folio of this book from the Royal Asiatic Society (Ms.239, f.531a), painted in Herat in 1440 and repainted around 1600–1605, was exhibited at the British Library in London, in "Mughal India, Art, Culture and Empire," from November 9, 2012–April 2, 2013. This exhibition was accompanied by the publication of a book covering the history of Mughal painting from its beginning until the colonial era: J.P. Losty and Malini Roy, *Mughal India: Art, Culture and Empire* (London: British Library, 2012).
- 18 Laura Parodi, "The Earliest Datable Mughal Painting," <http://www.asianart.com/articles/parodi/>
- 19 See Daud Ali, *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and *Gardens and Landscape Practices in Pre-colonial India, Histories from the Deccan*, ed. Daud Ali and Emma J. Flatt (New York: Routledge, 2012); Eloise Brac de la Perrière, *L'art du livre dans l'Inde des sultanats*; and Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translations*.
- 20 Milo Cleveland Beach, *The New Cambridge History of India*, 1. See chapter 1, "Painting in North India before 1540."
- 21 Efforts to harmonize the multifaith and multiethnic society under the governance of the medieval Sultanates are examined from different angles in *Surprising Bedfellows: Hindus and Muslims in Medieval and Early Modern India*, ed. Sushil Mittal (New York: Lexington Books, 2003); Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation and The Visual World of Muslim India: The Art, Culture and Society of the Deccan in the Early Modern Era*; Daud Ali, *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India*; Monica Juneja, "Spaces of Encounter and Plurality: Looking at Architecture in Pre-colonial North India," in *Religious Pluralism in South Asia and Europe*, ed. Jamal Malik and Helmut Reifeld (New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 245–67.
- 22 Qamar Adamjee's dissertation exposes the questions this Sultanate manuscript culture provokes in the case of the Chandayan manuscripts: Adamjee, "Strategies for Visual Narration in the Illustrated 'Chandayan' Manuscripts" (PhD, New York University, 2011), AAT 3482848.
- 23 Laura E. Parodi and Bruce Wannell, "The Earliest Datable Mughal Painting," and Eloise Brac de la Perrière, *L'art du livre dans l'Inde des sultanats*, 35–39. This author's hypothesis seems more plausible than Beach's interpretation or Amina Okada's similar assumption about Akbar as the one who introduced *kitabkhana* to Islamic India, in *Imperial Mughal Painters*, 11–12.

- 24 The adjective “impossible” and noun “impossibilities” as opposed to “compossible” and “compossibilities,” convey the notion of incompatibility, of being incapable of coexistence. They are borrowed from the terminology of Gilles Deleuze’s philosophy of difference.
- 25 I am very grateful to Qamar Adamjee for having shared with me this primary source’s excerpt and references. Abdul Qadir Badaoni, 1868, *Muntakhab al-tawarikh*, ed. Maulvi Ahmad Ali (in Persian), vol. II (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal), 250, and Abdul Qadir Badaoni, 1898, *Muntakhab al-tawarikh* (in English), trans. George S.A. Ranking, vol. I (Calcutta: Bengal Mission Press), 333.
- 26 Linda York Leach, *Mughal and Other Indian Paintings from the Chester Beatty Library*, vol. I (London: Scorpion Cavendish, 1995), 156.
- 27 This important cultural feature has been underemphasized, if not ignored in the historiography on Sultanate painting.
- 28 Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 175.
- 29 Barry Flood also rightly remarks that “architectural difference is correlated to cultural value,” in *Objects of Translation*, 180, 182.
- 30 Barry Flood quotes Philipp B. Wagoner’s expression of “fortuitous areas of convergence,” in *Objects of Translation*, 185, from Philipp B. Wagoner, “Fortuitous Convergences and Essential Ambiguities: Transcultural Political Elites in the Medieval Deccan,” *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 3, 3 (1999): 241–64.
- 31 An example of these representations is illustrated in Eloise Brac de la Perrière, *L’art du livre dans l’Inde des sultanats*, 112.
- 32 Eloise Brac de la Perrière describes this convergence in “L’apport Mamelouk,” *ibid.*, 221–25. She explains, “Ces apports mamelouks pouvaient facilement se fonder dans l’héritage indien non-islamique, Jain en particulier, qui reposait déjà sur des principes assez proches: stylization, absence de réalisme, caractère Fig.é des scènes, goût pour la symétrie et la compartimentation de l’espace,” 222.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 179.
- 34 Qamar Adamjee gave an illuminating presentation of these artifacts (based on her dissertation “Strategies for Visual Narration in the Illustrated ‘Chandayan’”) in her lecture at Stanford University, Abassi Program, 2012.
- 35 See Eloise Brac de la Perrière’s analysis of these manuscripts in *L’art du livre dans l’Inde des sultanats*, 123.
- 36 It is worth mentioning that, as Badaoni’s quotation notes, the book experience also involved live performances of the stories—a practice common to India and the Persian world.
- 37 On the theme of the body and corporeality, and its relation to pictorial representation, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Body and Expression, and Speech,” in *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. by Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962); and Galen A. Johnson, “Phenomenology and Painting: ‘Cezanne’s Doubt,’” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, 10–11.

- 38 On vitalism see Catherine Packham, *Eighteenth-Century Vitalism: Bodies, Culture, Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), and *Biology and Ideology from Descartes to Dawkins*, ed. Denis Alexander and Ronald L. Numbers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
- 39 See illustrations of plates 36–38 in Eloise Brac de la Perrière, *L'art du livre dans l'Inde des sultanats*.
- 40 The term “mimetic,” derived from the aesthetic concept of “mimesis,” does not equate to “realistic” or “illusionist.” Rather, it signifies the result of an artistic approach that draws inspiration from mundane appearances and their structuring principles. The representation resulting from this process does not copy but is construed from Nature and its constitutive elements. Mimetic images are thus conceptually conceived as a reflection of Nature’s order. See Valerie Gonzalez, “The Founding Aristotelian Concept of Mimesis in Islamic Aesthetics,” in *Insights on Islamic Aesthetics: Visual Culture and History* (Sarajevo: Kult, 2006), 94–111, and Derrida’s philosophical discussions based on Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s thematization of this concept, in *Of Grammatology*, part II, 200–216. For a discussion on mimetism in art in the religious framework of Islam, see Mika Natif, “The Painter’s Breath and Concepts of Idol Anxiety in Islamic Art,” in *Idol Anxiety*, ed. Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 41–55.
- 41 Hubert Damisch, “*La peinture prise au mot*,” preface by Meyer Shapiro, *Les Mots et les Images*, trans. by Pierre Alferi, 3rd ed. (Paris: Macula, 2011), 12.
- 42 For example, in her introduction to *A Mirror of Princes*, Kapila Vatsyayan writes, “The Mughals were deeply formed by the Ethos of India,” 3–4. Eloise Brac de la Perrière talks about “the particular context of India” (“*le context particulier de l’Inde*”) throughout *L’art du livre dans l’Inde des sultanats*.
- 43 This process is analyzed by Monica Juneja in “Translating the Body into Image.”
- 44 Here I again appropriate James Joyce’s words in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 186: “To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life!”
- 45 *Images of the Body in India: South Asian and European Perspectives on Rituals and Performativity*, ed. Axel Michaels and Christoph Wulf (New Delhi: Routledge, 2011), 235–60.
- 46 See the exploration of the concept of “carnal aesthetics” as applied to contemporary feminist art in *Carnal Aesthetics*, ed. Marta Zarzycka and Bettina Papenburg (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014).
- 47 In a paper titled “Vision as Bodily Praxis-Dance and the Aesthetics of the Image in North Indian Painting,” Monica Juneja underlined the cultural importance of the representation of dance in the Indian imagery of various periods and schools of painting, among them some Sultanate products; paper presented at the conference, *Dancing with Images, Images of Dance*, in honor of Gerhard Wolf at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz-Max Planck Institut, April 2013.
- 48 Pratapaditya Pal, review of Isabella Nardi, *The Theory of Citrasutras in Indian Painting: A Critical Re-evaluation of their Uses and Interpretations*, *Marg*, June 1, 2008, [www.highbeam.com/publications/marg-a-magazine-of-the-arts-p165614/june-2008](http://www.highbeam.com/publications/marg-a-magazine-of-the-arts-p165614/june-2008).

- 49 Plainly, in this discussion I set aside the Christian meanings of “transubstantiation,” “consubstantiation,” and “transfiguration,” in order to retain their semantic essence as processes of coextension and transference from one substance into another, from substance into figure, from essence into substance, from a figure into another, etc.
- 50 For a theoretical support to this discussion, see Paul Crowther’s discussion in chapter 5, “Sculpture and Transcendence,” *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts*, 86–98.
- 51 On the sculptural character of Indic and Indo-Muslim architecture, see Elizabeth Lambourn, “A Self-Conscious Art? Seeing Micro-Architecture in Sultanate South Asia,” *Muqarnas* 27 (2012): 121–56. This notion of “micro-architecture” signals that architectural construction in this context rests upon a strategy of joining small architectonic units to form a greater building. From the figurine-scale-like piece of sculpture to the monumental mass of sculpted volume, all components of this micro-architecture are basically sculptures of different sizes.
- 52 This notion covers a wide range of significations, depending on context. See *Carnal Knowledge: Toward a “New Materialism” through the Arts*, ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).
- 53 On the concept of countertext, the process of detextualization, and the phenomenon of countertextuality, see Harry Berger, *Situated Utterances: Texts, Bodies and Cultural Representations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).
- 54 See the study in Chapter 4 of this book that explains the scriptural ontology of Persian painting.
- 55 See the following studies by Shahzad Bashir, “The Alphabetical Body: Horufi Reflections on Language, Script, and the Human Form,” in *Proceedings of the Symposium Religious Texts in Iranian Languages*, ed. Fereydoon Vahman and Claus Pederson (Copenhagen: Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2007), 279–92; *Fazlallah Astarabadi and the Hurufis* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005); “Body,” in *Key Themes for the Study of Islam*, ed. Jamal Elias (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2010), 72–92; and *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).
- 56 Laura Weinstein has illuminated this production in her PhD dissertation, “Variation on a Persian Theme: Adaptation and Innovation in Early Manuscripts from Golconda” (Columbia University, New York, 2011). She also discussed this subject in a lecture, “The Persian Past as the Deccani Present: Archaism in Paintings from the Qutb Shahi Court of Golconda,” presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Philadelphia, March 25–28, 2011. Weinstein argued that the antiquarian pictorial fashion in this Deccani Sultanate springs from the Persian elite’s desire to keep their Persian past alive and to reconstruct their Persian identity in an Indian milieu. Without elaborating, Eloise Brac de la Perrière hinted at a similar explanation of the phenomenon in question in *L’art du livre dans l’Inde des sultanats*, 250–60.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 258.
- 58 See Christiane Gruber, “Questioning the ‘Classical’ in Persian Painting: Models and Problems of Definition,” in *Islamic Art Historiography*, <http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/gruber.pdf>. This article

highlights flaws in the historiography that have established arguable criteria for aesthetic appreciation and categorization.

- 59 Scholars have noted, evidenced, and continue to research the rich hybrid iconography of the Persian miniature in the fourteenth century. However, it is essential to understand that this quality of hybridity found in the figurative vocabulary does not imply the presence of hybridism at the conceptual level of the imagistic order. In the Persian imagery in question, the aesthetic structures are distinctively Persian in the sense that the borrowed Chinese and European elements all submitted to this Persian pictorial order, which I hope to concisely define in this book. The complexity of this subject calls for a separate aesthetic-critical study.
- 60 For a theoretical support to this discussion on figures versus setting, see Paul Crowther, chapter 2, "Figure, Plane and Frame: The Phenomenology of Pictorial Space," in *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts*, 35–59.
- 61 The bibliography on this subject is long, but here is a useful reference: Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995).
- 62 The Museum of Modern Art in New York houses a beautiful collection of these drawings.
- 63 For example, one may find Persian images that, on the narrative level, focus on, say, a king riding a horse with a retinue, but the illustration drives the perceptive attention away from the story's protagonists by dwarfing them amid a sprawling luxurious and eventful landscape. To note a celebrated specimen, in a painting representing Joseph and Zuleikha, the complex setting of the palace so effectively counterbalances the two figures that it overwhelms them in terms of pictorial phenomenality.
- 64 Stylistic abstraction does not necessarily indicate a mimetic or non-mimetic aesthetic system. It can serve both an idealistic and existential aesthetic as a particular mode of metaphysical representation. For example, the twentieth-century artistic movement of Concrete Art is abstract in the sense of being non-figurative and non-symbolic, but it remains existential and close to mundane reality inasmuch as it refers to its concreteness, particularly its raw materiality and "opticality" (the latter term was famously used by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried). Those natural properties are the conveyors of pure thought in Concrete Art. Abstraction is also resorted to in order to disfigure or distort the real, or to put it at distance with the intent of constructing an alternative aesthetic reality. To note another example, some highly geometric forms in African art are fundamentally mimetic. In conclusion, to determine the exact meaning of stylistic abstraction, one has to determine the artwork's metaphysical conception.
- 65 This expression "self-world-fusion" is borrowed from Galen A. Johnson in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, 11. For insights into ontology and metaphysics in painting, see this theorist's essay, "Ontology and Painting: 'Eye and Mind,'" 35–55.
- 66 An excerpt of Kapila Vatsyayan's introduction to *A Mirror of Princes, the Mughals and the Medici*, 8, offers a clear example of this misperception, remaining unchallenged since its publication in 1987: "What links the two [the cultures

- of Renaissance and Mughal India], at the fundamental level, is the changed attitude to Nature ... But also [Mughal realistic] portraiture is important because now man is important ... Now when man (i.e. the emperor) is the giver of justice, is the center of the universe, then life like painting is necessary." About realism in Mughal painting see also Jane Duran, "Naturalism and Mannerism in Indian Miniatures," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 35/4 (Winter 2001): 57–63.
- 67 Here I do not mention the pictorial production that, in Iran, remained at the margins of the evolution that Christiane Gruber discusses in her article "Questioning the 'Classical.'" Persian pictorial antiquarianism in Iran bears different meanings than in India.
- 68 For more details, see in Chapter 4 of this book the analysis of the visual *poesis* in Persian painting.
- 69 This is well documented in the academic literature on Mughal painting. See Priscilla Soucek, "Persian Artists in Mughal India: Influences and Transformations," *Muqarnas* 4 (1987): 166–81; Abolala Soudavar, "Between the Safavids and the Mughals: Art and Artists in Transition," *IRAN* 37 (1999): 49–66; *The Making of Indo-Persian Culture: Indian and French Studies*, ed. Alam Muzaffar, Françoise Delvoye Nalini, and Marc Gaborieau (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2000); Alam Muzaffar, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 70 Barbara Schmitz and Ziyaud-Din A. Desai, *Mughal and Persian Paintings and Illustrated Manuscripts in the Raza Library, Rampur* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 2006); Som Prakash Verma, "Illustrations of Persian Classics in Persian and Imperial Mughal Painting," in *The Making of Indo-Persian Culture: Indian and French Studies*, 223–38.
- 71 Jane Austen's description of the careful furnishing of the "east room" by Fanny Price, with a meaningful arrangement of her personal memorabilia, gifts, and other souvenirs at the family house, in *Mansfield Park* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 157.
- 72 The studies on Persian and Mughal painting provide a wealth of detail on these properties, which need no further mention here.
- 73 For these notions of multiplicities and consistencies, compossibles and impossibles, see "Gilles Deleuze," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- 74 Collaborative work in the *kitabkhana* is well-documented and has been amply studied.
- 75 Scholars describe this general quality of the early Akbari school in vague terms such as "more homogeneous," "more unified," or "more uniformed" than earlier Indo-Muslim painting.
- 76 Andrew Topsfield, *Paintings from Mughal India*, 6. In the rest of the scholarly literature, commentaries are of the same vein. For example, Susan Stronge thus describes scenes from the *Hamzanama*: "A surreal quality is given by the intermingling of Iranian influences with Indian Sultanates styles from the fifteenth century with the absorption of specific characteristics from Shiraz," in *Painting for the Mughal Emperor*, 25–6. Or see Amina Okada, who wrote "their artistic background and traditions [of the Mughal painters] inevitably provided

nascent Mughal art with frames of reference and mannerisms alien to the Safavid tradition," in *Imperial Mughal Painters*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), 13.

- 77 For example, many studies, as well as continuing research, focus on painstakingly sorting out the identity of the images' miscellany of past and contemporary iconography from variegated sources that attest to the Persianate habit of integrating old into new, making new out of old, and recycling, refurbishing, or completing collected preexisting items. For pioneer works in this direction, see again John Seyller, "Overpainting in the Cleveland Tutinama," and *Pearls of a Parrot of India*; and Mika Natif, "The SOAS Anvar-I Suhayli: The Journey of a 'Reincarnated Manuscript.'"
- 78 All studies on Mughal painting resort to this narrative even when a priori they seem to propose a more art critical approach. That is the case with Margaret Richardson's "Synthesis and Symbiosis: Akbar's Aesthetic Vision for India," *Virginia Review of Asian Studies* (Archives: 2010): 181–93. <http://virginiareviewofasianstudies.com/archives2010.shtml>, and Bonnie C. Wade's *Imaging Sound, An Ethnomusicological Study of Music, Art and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
- 79 Among the numerous publications on the topic of cultural exchange between East and West, see Brinda Charry, ed., *Emissaries in Early Modern Literature and Culture, Mediation, Transmission, Traffic, 1550–1700* (Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).
- 80 Susan Stronge, *Painting for the Mughal Emperor*, 23.
- 81 I noted the questionable use of such terms in Part I. I quote Amina Okada's words as just one example among many, in *Imperial Mughal Painters*, 10. Most specialists deliver similar definitions. See also Milo C. Beach commenting on the illustrations of the *Hamzanama*, in *The New Cambridge History of India*, 27–28.
- 82 It must be underscored, however, that some interpretations of this feature by Ebba Koch are untenable and therefore justly contested. She argues that these conflictive pictorial modes thematize a hierarchical and political order of power and submission. To her, the abstractive "formal" style conveys the message of authority. In this Manichaean vision of the paintings divided in oppositional terms of oppression and subjection, the dominated, the enemy, the weak, and the alien are those who are realistically depicted. That there exists a tradition of realistic renderings of the emperor himself, in drawing in particular, invalidates this vision. See Ebba Koch, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, and *King of the World*, 138, and *Occasional Papers*, 42.
- 83 Alphonse de Waelhens, "Merleau-Ponty: Philosopher of Painting," *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, 177. This theoretical aspect of painting will be also discussed in next chapter, with concrete pictorial examples.

## Hyperdialectics in the Akbari Pictorial Synthesis

Essence and existence, imaginary and real, visible and invisible—painting scrambles all our categories, spreading out before us its oneiric universe of carnal essences, actualized resemblances, mute meanings.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, 1961

Given the Mughal prioritization, in conceptual terms, of mimesis over idealism, the aesthetic specificities and stylistic conventions of the different pictorial modes used in Akbari book art appear more or less severely reshaped depending on their level of suitability for minimal imitative expressivity. Inherently possessing the properties necessary to produce imitative effects or signs, some figural idioms of Indic and Sultanate origin did not require much reshaping, while the European element was effortlessly incorporated into the Mughal repertoire. But how could the impetus to give pictures a quality of concreteness cope with the contradictory desire to fashion them according to Persian aesthetic criteria? The answer lies in the Mughal acceptance and versatile application of the concept of hyperdialectics in the material domain of painting. “Hyperdialectics” (or the “hyperdialectic”) is a Merleau-Pontian notion that, adapted to this book, describes the intense form of aesthetic dialectics resulting from these Mughal deconstructive processes of the Persian paragon. It is a free and unrestrained dialectic, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains:

The only good dialectic is the hyperdialectic. The bad dialectic is that which does not wish to lose its soul in order to save it, which wishes to be dialectical immediately, becomes autonomous, and ends up at cynicism, at formalism, for having eluded its own double meaning. What we call hyperdialectic is a thought that on the contrary is capable of reaching the truth because it envisages without restriction the plurality of the relationships and what has been called ambiguity.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, instead of giving up one of the two aesthetic impossibles or dissolving one into the other to avoid ambiguity, the Mughals implemented a particular

hyperdialectical game by which the Persian paragon went through a double processing of retention and deconstruction. This complex process not only made possible but also productive the coexistence of these impossibles. It accomplished the prowess of creating a chiasm from the principled disjunctivity and perceptual dissonance that the improbable association of the Persian text-like design and the Mughal mimetic attempts would bring about. Built upon “a surpassing that reassembles,” this chiasm preserves the Persian pictorial qualities and properties dear to Mughal taste while simultaneously fulfilling the Mughal aspiration toward a rational conception of the picture.<sup>2</sup> Let us recall, however, that this deconstructive move had already begun in Sultanate book art in the form of the surreptitious slippage from pictorial *poesis* to *mimesis* observed in the Persianate corpus. One suspects, in addition, that the process must have continued from then on, until it climaxed in a peak of dialectic tension with the 1555–56 wave of late Timurid-Safavid art leading to the creation of those remarkable Akbari images one may term “constructively hyperdialectical”<sup>3</sup> (Figs. 11–12, 20–21, 34).

But to shed more light on this Mughal manipulation of the Persian pictorial aesthetic, one must first get an acute sense of this Persian aesthetic itself as the product of a specific developmental path from literary to visual *poesis*—that is, as a construction of the verbal imaginary become figural, a pure “poetic object” to quote Jorge Luis Borges in *Labyrinths*.<sup>4</sup> The aesthetic studies available on this subject being meager and unreliable, the detailed discussion in the next sections will provide the critical support necessary to pursue this analysis of Mughal painting.<sup>5</sup>

### “Ut pictura poesis”: The Poetic Ontology of Persian Painting

The commonly used generic locution “Persian painting” designates the Mongol-Turkic-Persian art that evolved from the thirteenth century up to the Modern period in the historic Persian world, and up to the present in contemporary Iran.<sup>6</sup> In an article criticizing the presentation of the history of this art, Christiane Gruber rightly unsettled Eurocentric notions of “classicism” or “classical” accomplishment versus supposedly primitive and Baroque-like phases upon which an ill-fitting scholarly narrative of rise and decline has been established.<sup>7</sup> Without engaging in the delicate enterprise of revisiting this questionable narrative, I am nevertheless forced to briefly explain my stance on the matter in order to define what I refer to as “Persian painting” in this study.

First, to fit this book’s periodicity I will not expand our perspective on this material’s history beyond the Safavid era (1501–1760).

Second, while acknowledging that there are different possibilities for chronicling the history of Persian painting, depending on the choice of

epistemic vantage point, from my aesthetic-critical viewpoint Shah Tahmasp's reign (1514–76) corresponds to a momentous period. By the Timurid era (1363–1506), Persian painting had acquired and inscribed for the long term its most characteristic and quintessential aesthetic particulars—those aesthetic particulars forming the founding conceptual level of the pictorial expression and to be distinguished from the stylistic level covering the variegated regional schools and manners that blossomed under the impulse of diverse patronages, interests, and opportunities.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in the first half of the sixteenth century and based on the aesthetic foundations and potentialities formed between the fourteenth century and the Timurid era, the Safavids made significant experiments, which reached their peak under Shah Tahmasp's patronage<sup>9</sup> (Fig. 37).

In the seventeenth century, the significant impact of contemporary foreign traditions manifest in the cross-pollination with Mughal and European art infused the established Safavid manner with fresh series of forms. I have touched upon this process with my critique of Shah 'Abbas's portrait in Chapter 1 (Fig. 1). This infusion marked what I would call "a return to iconographic hybridity" if viewed from an historical perspective beginning with the cosmopolitanism of the Persian vocabulary in the Mongol and Timurid periods previously noted.<sup>10</sup>

From the aesthetic-critical perspective, the essential fact to be retained from this basic evolutionary scheme is that the periodicity formed by the first Safavid monarchs' rule (until Shah Tahmasp) and the beginning of the Mughal Empire coincides with the full completion of a pictorial entity in Greater Iran that I designate with the all-embracing term "the Persian image" or "the Persian picture."<sup>11</sup> If the parallel and distinct phenomenon of antiquarianism or archaizing imagery is set aside, it can be safely asserted that the imagistic entity completed in the early Modern period constitutes a milestone in the history of Persian painting similar to, say, fifth-century Greek sculpture in the history of Mediterranean art or eleventh- to twelfth-century Chinese painting in the evolution of pictorial practice in China.

To ponder the nature of the aesthetic complexity of the Persian image or picture, one must recall the origin of Persian book art as well as the conditions of its formation, briefly summarized next.

#### *A BRIEF REMINDER OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF PERSIAN PAINTING'S RISE*

Initially, Persian painting developed as an accessory to texts of all literary genres<sup>12</sup> (Figs. 18, 19). From the tenth century onward, enjoying stories of all kinds by means of diverse literary rituals and poetic performances was at the center of Islamic-Persian manuscript culture, placing works of language, poetics, and calligraphy at the highest level of human creation.<sup>13</sup> Painting served as a visual support to the book experience, tremendously increasing its

rhetorical power over time. Many studies illuminate the illustrative function of the miniature and its performative role in Persian literary jousts, which engaged multicognitive experiences of reading, reciting, hearing, enacting, and visualizing narratives.<sup>14</sup> In so doing, they also unravel significant discrepancies and mysteries marking a complex and often ambivalent semantic relationship between text and image that bespeaks an autonomy of pictorial expression in Persian book art. Yet, painting never completely severed its bond with the world of letters. The still-vibrant tradition of reading epics with the support of illustrations in present-day Iran is a reminder of this cultural fact. In coffee houses monumental painted panels form a visual background to the performances of professional storytellers narrating the same medieval stories before audiences equally enthralled by the storytelling and the impressive figurations.<sup>15</sup> Let us experience a breath of Persian poetry with the following excerpt from *Mathnawi-i Ma'nawi* (*Spiritual Couplets*) by the mystic poet Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–73):

Listen to the reed,  
 how it tells a tale  
 complaining of separation:  
 Ever since I was parted  
 From the reed-bed  
 My lament has made  
 Men and women weep.  
 I search for a heart  
 Smitten by separation  
 That I may tell the pain  
 Of love-desire  
 Everyone who has got far from his source  
 Harks back for the time  
 When he was one with it.<sup>16</sup>

This recapitulation of the origin of Persian painting is meant to buttress the following analytical propositions. The Persian philosophy of art, centered on verbalized and poetizing imagination, is at the source of the original conceptualization of the Persian picture as visual-figural reflection of an essentially poetic and logocentric mode of world-apprehension; a poetics-based conceptualization of the image's metaphysics that concerns all genres of representations drawing from literary, scientific, or religious themes.<sup>17</sup> Not only did painting serve a multiform text-evocation function but also, crucially, this function shaped the Persian picture as a coextension of the linguistic-poetic field, with which it shares ontological constitutive structures and the same phenomenology of aesthetic delivery. I would say, quoting Paul Ricoeur's aphorism, that if "writing, in the limited sense of the word, is a particular case of iconicity," Persian pictorial iconicity is a particular case of writing.<sup>18</sup> More precisely, the Persian image constitutes a genuine scriptural gesture as much

for its conceptual and semantic relation to texts as for its phenomenality, opticality, and plastic constitution. In terms of aesthetic ontology, the Persian image may therefore be variously characterized as an “optical text,” “a pictorial writing,” “a figural sematography,” or “a chirographic picture.”

Beyond cultural borders, the Persian image is the manifestation of Horace’s famous adage in *Ars Poetica*: “*ut pictura poesis*” (“as is painting, so is poetry” or “poetry is like painting”), a concrete proof of Simonides of Keos’s idea that “*Poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens*” (“Poetry is a speaking picture, painting is a silent poetry”).<sup>19</sup> Or as in Chinese culture, in a Persian context painting and poetry were two facets of the same poetic object—an intertwinement of the textual and the visual that, for example, the Northern Song poet Su Shi (1037–1101) expressed in a poem written on a painting by Tang artist and author Wang Wei (699–759): “When one savors Wang Wei’s poems, there are paintings in them. When one looks at Wang Wei’s paintings, there are poems.”<sup>20</sup>

#### THE VERBAL TRANSPOSED TO THE FIGURAL

Seemingly elusive aesthetic features of the Persian miniature, such as the interpenetration between figuration and frame or the iconographic trespassing of the image’s edges, turn out to be comprehensible only if one considers them transpositions from the verbal and the scriptural to the visual language in representations conceived both *as* and *like* texts (Figs. 1, 28, 37–8). Even when stylistic effects of three-dimensionality and detailed figurative representations inspired by European art appear to bring the picture optically closer to reality, as in some Jalayirid paintings and drawings, the figural composition follows a conceptual credo dictated by the order of writing. Although another book would be needed to argue in depth such a proposition, I will offer a prelude here.

An outcome of Persian poetics and originally at the service of the Persian verb, the Persian picture logically addresses the imagining consciousness and is a direct projection of it on the pictorial field. As Guy Petitdemange remarked in commenting on Emmanuel Levinas’s text *Reality and Its Shadow* (*La réalité et son ombre*), “Imagination, the organ of sensitivity, does not reach out to the thing itself, it substitutes its image to it.”<sup>21</sup> Contrary to images constructed on the basis of a direct optical seizing of Nature, defining them as an “iconic, aesthetic augmentation” or a “contraction and miniaturization” of it, the Persian pictorial approach rests upon the same process of internalization and distancing from the mundane involved in the creation of poetic works by virtue of their immateriality and visionary dimensions.<sup>22</sup> As art historians Robert Rivlin and Karen Gravelle have acknowledged, “The ability to visualize something internally is closely linked with the ability to describe it verbally. Verbal and written descriptions create highly specific mental

images ... . The link between vision, visual memory, and verbalization can be quite startling."<sup>23</sup>

The generally non-imitative, abstractive, and dreamlike plasticity of the Persian picture is indicative of its literary-poetic conception and roots. This plasticity forms an "irreality" like Jorge Luis Borges's imagined world of *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius*, a parallel or alternative world governed by its own laws and its own universals, ignoring the postulates of physics and the ordinary logic of real spatiotemporality and natural appearances, drawing instead from the infinitely expansive domain of the "imaginal" realm and consciousness, to employ Henri Corbin's famous adjective.<sup>24</sup> This reinvented universe reorders forms by using, in particular, creative mathematics. In it, the impossible is possible: multiple viewing positions, simultaneity of disconnected time sequences in one and the same space, geometrization and patterning of the figuration, and other general stylistic features of aesthetic idealism to which I have already alluded and which are described in any book on Persian painting.

However, defining Persian styles of picturing and identifying its images' literature-inspired thematic does not suffice to explain the poetic-linguistic ontology of the Persian picture. I have noted that the Sultanate illustrations, although prominently abstract and graphic in terms of style and equally linked to texts, are nevertheless intimately related to concreteness. Paul Cézanne's late work is another example of a highly abstractional pictorial strategy that, without further knowledge, could be viewed mistakenly as a symptom of abstractive detachment from Nature through an imaginary reinvention of it, or as a pure inner poetic-pictorial wandering, whereas it is actually the product of intense retinal scrutiny of the landscape and an utter rationalization of its phenomenal presence for the purpose of attaining the truth of and in it. His statement "The landscape thinks itself in me" spells out Cézanne's hyper-fusional relationship with Nature.<sup>25</sup> At the opposite end of this pictorial phenomenology sits Salvador Dali or René Magritte's surrealist imagery whose stylistic realism nonetheless depicts an "irreality" constructed by the imagining mind and involving the participation of the unconscious and the dreaming consciousness.<sup>26</sup>

As these phenomenological models make clear, the Persian image's metaphysics situates itself at the antipodes of the representational existentialism embodied in Cézanne's work, while in strict terms of stylistic constitution both present abstract qualities and neither can be defined as realistic. On the other hand, although not always on the same path stylistically, the Persian image shares with Surrealist painting the primacy of the (indirect) mental over the (direct) scopic mode of world-apprehension in the process of representational conceptualization, as well as its anchorage in literature, poetics, and the imaginary.<sup>27</sup>

*A DOUBLY MEDIATED GAZE ON THE WORLD*

Further consideration of the circumstances of the becoming of the Persian picture leads one to realize that it does not simply parallel Persian literature in its fashion of recreating the world by internalizing and reimagining it. The internalizing modalities of image conceptualization this becoming presupposes are much more complex insofar as the world it represents is not a pictorially imagined recreation of the real itself but rather the pictorially imagined recreation of the poetized and rewritten version of the real in texts of diverse literary genres, all infused with poetic essence.<sup>28</sup> This excerpt from Nizami's *Khamsa* allows one to sense this poetic atmosphere of Persian art; in it, the minister of a Sasanian King blames his master for his injustice:

Intent on sport, Nushirwan on a day  
Suffered his horse to bear him far away  
From his retainers. Only his Wazir  
Rode with him, and no other soul was near.  
Crossing the game-stocked plain, he halts and scans  
A village ruined as his foeman's plans.  
There, close together, sat two owls apart,  
Whose dreary hootings chilled the monarch's heart.  
"What secrets do these whisper?" asked the King,  
Of his Wazir; "what means the song they sing?"  
"O Liege," the Minister replied, "I pray  
Forgive me for repeating what they say.  
Not for the sake of song mate calls to mate:  
A question of betrothal they debate.  
That bird her daughter gave to this, and now  
Asks him a proper portion to allow,  
Saying: 'This ruined village give to me,  
And also others like it two or three.'  
'Let be,' the other cries; 'our rulers leave Injustice to pursue, and do not grieve,  
For if our worthy monarch should but live,  
A hundred thousand ruined homes I'll give.'"<sup>29</sup>

Thus, the Persian picture results not from a single but a double internalizing mode of world-apprehension—namely, the imaginary internalization in pictorial images of the poetic imaginal internalization of the world in texts. In other words, as a visual instance, the Persian picture is doubly removed from reality. Its extraordinary plastic complexities are the fruit of this doubly mediated gaze on existence, which is essentially a gaze of poetic nature, a poetic vision springing from Persian poetics and poetized texts ultimately transposed in idealistic pictorial forms projecting an idealistic metaphysics.<sup>30</sup> One may say that the maker of Persian painting is an "abstract perceiver of the world," to appropriate again Jorge Luis Borges's wording, as in "The Garden

of Forking Paths” he describes the narrator’s mental wandering in the lost Chinese maze.<sup>31</sup> But yet, at another level of tenuousness, this attachment of the Persian image to the domain of the verb equally underlies its plasticity itself and its superlative phenomenality.

### Persian Picturing as Writing

Beyond any narrative and style specifics, the Persian image presents linguistic and chirographic qualities quite analogous to those of the products of writing and calligraphy, understood as both a verbal system and an organized material trace on a given scriptural medium. While some scholars did notice that early specimens of Persian painting present pictographic qualities and that those qualities have contributed to constructing a particular Persian pictorial visuality, this valuable observation has not been explored in critical-aesthetic terms.<sup>32</sup> For in the same way that the Persian iconography derives from textual themes, the very morphology of the Persian pictoriality as a conglomerate of forms derives from writing at the functional-structural level of the image. Indeed, both the content and the form of the Persian picture result from this process by which the Persian literary-poetic expression has reached out to the visual territory to expand its field of creative action.<sup>33</sup> This means that, in addition to the actual presence of “regular” writing in the paintings, namely, calligraphic boxes and inscriptions, the pictorial forms themselves function like a scriptural system, substituting the alphabet format with figural signifiers in order to construct an aesthetic object of linguistic order akin to a sematography.<sup>34</sup>

A branch of writing based on non-alphabetical signs, the sematography genre includes hieroglyphs, cuneiform symbols, musical and mathematical notations, or any figural graphs used according to the syntactical logic of linguistics as opposed to the non-syntactical, aleatory, or quasi-aleatory order of forms as they appear and exist in Nature. Operating in the pictorial field, the Persian case constitutes a particularly complex sematography. It combines all together the cognitive properties of discourse, text, writing, figure, and representation, thereby playing with both the rigor and intelligibility of the idiomatic enunciation and the disruptive optical force of a full-fledged iconicity. So while the image relies on the “transparency and lucidity” of a verbal organization of the forms-scripts, the latter’s figurality “injects opacity” into this organization by virtue of the disruptive property inherent to the figure’s pure perceptuality.<sup>35</sup> This produces a mixed imagistic-linguistic expression that Jean-François Lyotard’s philosophical intimations in *Discourse, Figure* render in the clearest manner, “at once discourse and figure, a tongue lost in a hallucinatory scenography.”<sup>36</sup>

The Persian pictographic idiom or figural tongue relies on a rich lexicography whose core is formed by a spectrum of ideographic figurations and iconic morphemic compositions that, like words, possess predetermined semantic properties and, put together in a certain order, operate like a notational system usable in an infinite number of syntactic configurations and possibilities.<sup>37</sup> For example, in the rich Persian spectrum of approaches to human representation, the stylistic prototype of the disembodied and modular figure clearly presents the morphology of a figural script or morpheme rather than that of a being of flesh and bones<sup>38</sup> (Figs. 28, 37–8). Some ready-made iconographic configurations such as groups of people accompanied by a horse can be repeated and reused several times in different miniatures.<sup>39</sup> The elements of the scenes' setting as well, rock formations, architecture, fauna, and flora, designed with archetypal forms, similarly compose a vocabulary used in the same linguistic manner.

This character of modularity extends to the images' structure itself. A range of recurrent geometrical formulas and coordinates encode the iconic discourse as alphabets build words, sentences articulate speeches, and concepts contour thoughts. Thus, a pyramidal order of human representations may enunciate a relationship of authority or the carefully arranged tilting of the figures may signify activities of communication, and so on.<sup>40</sup>

In this figural-linguistic structure are embedded other representations of different aesthetic nature such as genre scenes and glimpses at contemporary life that in the sixteenth century acquired a remarkable degree of realism with the increasing use of the technique of modeling and shading (Figs. 29, 32). These scenes do not always present an obvious link of meaning with the main narrative. Sometimes they just seem to add a semantic supplement forming extrapolations in the picture's discourse. They thus may remodel the well-known illustrated story or poem into a more challenging multilayered work, an interpretive version of it.<sup>41</sup> It is worth demonstrating this linguistic functioning of the Persian picture with an examination of one of its particularly enigmatic morphemic structures: the anonymous figures popping out of a windows, from behind a rock, or seen in the remote corner of a landscape.

#### MORPHEMIC STRUCTURES: THE EXAMPLE OF THE FORMULAIC POPPING FIGURES

Usually designated with the misnomer "mannerism" for want of a better term, this formulaic human presence appears too frequently in different narrative contexts not to function as a *parergon* of some kind (a foundational, non-ornamental element), like "the lookers" in Dutch painting analyzed by Svetlana Alpers, or the plebeian onlookers of the princely dances in Heian Japan that Lady Murasaki Shikibu beautifully depicts in *The Tales of Genji*: "Humble and ignorant folk sitting afar on tree-roots or beneath some rock, or half-buried in deep banks of fallen leaves"<sup>42</sup> (Figs. 18, 20, 29, 38). As insignificant



32 *The Anecdote of the Man Who Fell into the Water*, by Sultan 'Ali al-Mashhadi (active late fifteenth–early sixteenth century), 1487. Folio from a *Mantiq al-tair* (*Language of the Birds*) by Farid al-Din 'Attar (c. 1142–1220). Present-day Afghanistan, Herat. Opaque watercolor, silver, and gold on paper. © 2000–2014 Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights reserved

and merely mannerist as they may appear, these figures are among the poorly understood factors of semantization at the periphery of main scenes that build up the Persian picture's polysemy.<sup>43</sup> One may suspect that unknown participants are thus placed among the recognizable protagonists of a given story in order to figure ideographically the meaningful act of witnessing. In this way the scene of the story, often mythical or purely literary, acquires the more tangible dimension of an ordinary human environment and is thus lent a familiar atmosphere.

Viewed in this light, this pattern of the ordinary lookers forms an affixable morpheme, a recurring discrete unit of meaning production modulating the main root-morphemic structures of the Persian image's pictorial-lexical nucleus by introducing in it the semantic notions of the witnessed versus the intimate, the plural versus the singular, the public versus the private, the collective versus the individual, the real versus the imaginary, and so on. Either by its presence or absence, the pattern in question contributes to the meaning, connotation, psychology, and mood of the event depicted.

#### *CHIROGRAPHIC QUALITY OF THE FIGURATIONS*

The chirographic quality of Persian pictoriality is the corollary of this linguistic organization of its shapes and designs. To probe this complex aspect of the Persian image, a theoretical preliminary is needed.

Among other philosophers, Edmund Husserl and Ludwig Wittgenstein have delved into the affinities between the morphology of writing and that of things and beings in Nature that remind one of their common belonging to the sphere of the sensible.<sup>44</sup> Similarly characterized by a recognizable physiognomy, both the figure and the letter are in effect processes of purely visual cognitivity. Yet, forms functioning primarily as scriptures and forms functioning primarily as images possess a different type of corporeality directly affecting their mode of meaning production. Given that any morphology exists in the space it inhabits, one of the differences that fundamentally distinguish purely iconic representations from calligraphic and chirographic forms, including figurative calligraphy and artistic sematography, resides in the very ontology of this space.<sup>45</sup> This difference of the nature of the space constitutes a key element in the definition of any image as textual picture, figurative writing, or pure figuration (or as purely iconic representation).<sup>46</sup>

In the latter case, what is commonly named "space" corresponds to this "tangible thickness" of the world, to appropriate Maurice Merleau-Ponty's terminology—namely, the lived, animated, and particles-loaded natural space whose main quality is depth.<sup>47</sup> This space has the particular property of wrapping objects like an invisible envelope and binding them with one another in a linkage of consubstantiality. In painting, such a space can be stylistically represented in various ways, either by imitative, denotative, or abstractive

picturing strategies. For the purpose of clarity, I created a wording by which I differentiate between this enveloping spatial entity I call “iconic space” and another I call “scriptural space,” characterized by different properties.

Unlike the iconic space, the scriptural space is depth free, unanimated, and quasi-immaterial.<sup>48</sup> It does not envelop or carry the bodies of letters or other graphs used in writing, be they figurative or non-figurative. In addition, it is devoid of any capacity of juncture. If the iconic space consubstantiates, the scriptural space signals separation, disconnection, isolation, or insulation. It actually is not a space at all but pure absence, the very absence of the chirographic trace on the blankness of the virginal scriptural medium not yet filled by the material presence of the written body. And when writing appears, it becomes this contained or contoured albeit incommensurable void between the alphabetical morphologies, around the letters’ rims and tracing, and in the interstices of their unfolding. Like the Japanese *ma*, this indescribable abyss that separates two objects, two sounds, or two events, the scriptural space can be sensed and seized upon only by default.<sup>49</sup> It exactly corresponds, in writing and speech, to the dead intervals between wordings and silences between utterances, or to the suspension of meaning by means of which the verb instantiates the *phainesthai* (giving, showing, or unveiling itself) of sense.<sup>50</sup> It is, in sum, altogether the absolute nothingness against which the “thingness” of material writing institutes itself, the phenomenological nonbeing as the “degree zero” of being, the invisible as the “degree zero of the [pictorial-scriptural] visible,” and the non-language as the degree zero of the verbal instance.<sup>51</sup>

#### THE SCRIPTURAL SPACE OF THE PERSIAN PICTURE

The question of the exact nature of the pictorial space in the Persian picture is a vast and difficult one. After repeatedly scrutinizing the works’ forms and reflecting on their linguistic structure (already discussed), I came up with the following conclusions. The Persian representations’ imagistic terrain (space) is absolutely of a scriptural order, yet it also fosters, as a capacity, not as an inherent structural component, something like an iconic space but not identical to it, a kind of third species halfway between the two entities. Fundamentally, revisiting Jacques Derrida’s postulate “*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*” (“there is nothing outside the text”), one could say that within the Persian picture *il n’y pas de hors-forme* (there is nothing outside the form), only void and blankness in the same way as *il n’y pas de hors-lettre* (there is nothing outside the letter) in the material realm of writing as perceptual object.<sup>52</sup> It is as if the air had been sucked out of the representations (Figs. 28–9, 33, 37–8). This implies that the Persian pictoriality replicates in the iconicity of figuration the textual-chirographic constitutive scheme of the written instance taking shape from the blank scriptural medium (“blank” in the sense of “free of writing”).

In the Persian image, there exists no link of consubstantiality between iconographic elements, an absence that is quintessential to the Persian pictorial aesthetic. Those elements are instead conjoined in a shape-against-shape articulation as in an opus intarsia, when they are not separated by that ungraspable emptiness of the non-form or the blank outside the form. A visual examination of key figural configurations in Persian painting supports this assertion.

The space-free scriptural plane that serves as pictorial field to the Persian image appears rather graspable in some standard iconographic arrangements—for example, in the depiction of people standing or sitting in a flowery landscape (Figs. 28, 37). When the figures are not in direct contact with other forms through the meeting-yet-dividing point of the drawing's lineament, they seem suspended in a motionless still levitation amid an insulating and gravity-less area dissolving in one indefinite entity the mimetic binary of the terrestrial and aerial planes. Between these figures and the landscape soaring behind them stands an unmeasurable and impenetrable distance that is precisely this nothingness under discussion. However, other iconographic complexities often complicate this basic representational scheme.

Remarkable in this regard is the formation, previously evoked, of congregated elements of earth, water, or fire dramatically stretching, swelling, waving, receding, and protruding like lava, cell growths, or fire combustions at the images' periphery and beyond textboxes, particularly spectacular in Safavid painting (Figs. 1, 30, 32, 37). These figural expansions, in particular the spanning back and forth from foreground to background at various degrees of amplitude, give a sense of spatial instance in the picture's two-dimensional layout. Indeed, as a general rule, volumetric forms in movement conjure up the iconic space convoking in the picture the reality of natural physics as one experiences it in life.<sup>53</sup> But this also may not necessarily be the case. Dynamic and volumetric aesthetic morphologies do exist that do not imply the existence of the iconic space and that, therefore, indicate the possibility of miscegenation between the latter and the scriptural plane resulting in a third type of space, neither fully two-dimensional nor fully three-dimensional. The written body or trace belongs to the category of such morphologies. It possesses a corporeality variably dynamic and variably fluid or thick, sometimes almost massive and quasi-three-dimensional, yet it unfolds within the medium's immaterial blankness.

This reflection leads to infer that, despite the written body's capacity for movement and bodily modulation, it does not produce depth such that the area contiguous to its forms remains untraversable, depth free, and still.<sup>54</sup> The effects of these overflowing Persian patterns can be described in similar if not quite identical terms. Similarly to the writing or calligraphy's ink or other material trace, in the Persian picture the paint's flux dynamically soars, runs,



33 *Prince Humāy at the Gate of Humāyun's Castle*, by Junayd Baghdadi, 1396, from the *Khamseh* of Khwāju Kermānī (in Persian). Jalayirid Sultanate (1340–1411), Baghdad. © British Library Board

swells, frays, and drips on the scriptural plane with the notable difference that the figurations' greater organic ability to modulate their corporeal mass allows the painting to reach and blur the separating line between aesthetic two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality; hence the fascinating fact that the two-dimensional Persian images produce the impression of a certain spatial quality. However, this process does not entail the full entry of Persian iconography in the iconic space's territory, nor does it introduce in the Persian picture one of its main properties, the consubstantiality between all represented forms.

Furthermore, as spectacularly dynamic as they may be, these Persian figural expansions remain carefully restrained, as if an invisible force were pressing more or less strongly against the pictorial surface in order to prevent further stretching and growth toward the viewer (Figs. 1, 32). And as if it were the consequence of this pressing, the vertical and horizontal direction of extension

always prevails and controls the backward-forward movement. In other words, the Persian picture limits and formats the inner unfolding of depth that these and other similarly quasi-three-dimensional iconographic effects may engender; a strategy that by principle constitutes a countersense in relation to the very definition of the aesthetic concept of iconic space based on its attributes of indefiniteness and continuity, if not infinity. Consequently, one cannot accurately talk about space in these Persian pictorial instances, but rather about an extraordinary invention, that of a mixed iconic-scriptural plane in round hyperdialectical movement between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality.

In the particular register of architectural representation, a kind of compressed and foreshortened perspective again appears on the verge of inviting the iconic space into the Persian pictorial structure; if it does, the invariable presence of key abstract designs and patterns of flatness in the immediate vicinity or midst of the spatial occurrence always postulates and asserts the dominance of the two-dimensionality as the image's conceptual basis (Figs. 33, 38). It is in this sense that the latter fosters, harbors, or invites

spatial constructions to settle on its territory, as a capacity precisely, but without partaking of its structure. Furthermore, the very type of perspectival rendering in the Persian picture is not itself a full-fledged aesthetic three-dimensionality in the sense that the space it seemingly creates is closer to pure emptiness than to a sensible palpable area deployed in depth. Particularly revelatory of this aesthetic quality is the popular pattern of pavilions, towers, balconies, or loggias protruding, soaring, or projected out of the buildings and beyond the images' border (Fig. 38).

Owing to their see-through structure or positioning in space, these constructions would in principle institute the existence of depth and gravity. This should be particularly true when they display features of perspective. But whether two-dimensional or three-dimensional, usually what sits above, around, and inside the apertures of these aedicules fits the category of spatial design only at the notional level. Within the pictorial field, instead of space a non-form-absence-nothingness characterizes the surrounding zone of these architectural representations. Sometimes that is actually the case, as cuts in the painted layer forming non-painted reserved fields reveal the folio's bare plane underneath in a *pochoir* effect.<sup>55</sup> Alternatively, a blind color field fills the emptiness between pillars, columns, posts, or walls.

A look at other architectural renderings will complete this analysis. A Jalayirid painting by Junayd (late fourteenth century) illustrating an episode of the love story between Humay and Humayun provides a good case in point (Fig. 33). This work features an elaborate architectural and landscape figuration that, in addition to the aforementioned paradoxical combination of perspective and flatness, includes a naturalistic depiction of flying birds bringing a slight touch of aerodynamic and stylistic realism in the composition that is otherwise highly graphic. One might contend this alliance of perspective and naturalism effectively turns the pictorial field into something concretely three-dimensional and less scriptural. Yet, this is not what occurs in the image. The presence of the space-creating device does not suffice to effect the switching of the aesthetic matrix from form-in-blankness to form-in-space despite the spatial suggestion it certainly infuses in it. The proof of this is provided by the text-box attached to the wall of the castle before the cypress tree.

Indeed, according to basic rules of aesthetic physics, inserting a calligraphic cartouche or a framed inscription inside a figuration featuring iconic space even in minimal or ambivalent terms, necessarily effects the intersection between two distinct structural logics based on the oppositional scheme between the picture's spatiotemporality and the written piece's abstract plane (Fig. 33). In Junayd's opus, the calligraphy instead appears rather in harmony with the rest of the iconography, at least not in rupture with it, as it should were the representation to contain truly empowered instances of iconic space in its morphology. This entails that the calligraphic and figural

regimes are both anchored in the same chirographic premises of writing. And both fundamentally unfold against the folio's surface so that the three-dimensional effects of the architectural perspective and the aerial element produce an extension and tension of the two-dimensional aesthetic toward the three-dimensionality rather than a shift from one to the other.

By virtue of these aesthetic physiological similarities between the alphabetical and iconic registers, in this Jalayirid folio and by extension in the Persian picture in general, text-boxes and images do not construct true dualities. In return, they form symbiotic imbrications of two variants of one and the same species. Their intertwinements may diversely form compenetrations, concatenations, agglutinations, or superimpositions either separated by voids or pasted one upon the other as in a collage (Figs. 20, 28, 32, 37–8). In brief, in the Persian image calligraphy and inscriptions do not constitute additions or insertions in the figural fabric but count among the components or organic members of the Persian sematographic pictoriality.

#### COMPARING PERSIAN PICTORIALITY TO PAPER CONSTRUCTIONS

Making analogies with other figurative arts pertaining to the category of scriptural-visual expressions will close this presentation of the theme of space in the Persian picture, so important to understanding the Mughal approach to this art. A comparison with the arts of collage and paper construction can cast more light on this complex matter. Similar to some paintings of Analytical Cubism, the Persian image possesses the aesthetic physicality of an assemblage of patterned and colored paper sheets, superimposed and pleated, folded and unfolded, contoured and cropped, and ultimately pasted or as if so on the folio's surface. It also presents a similitude, in the two-dimensional pictorial field, with the images in pop-up books and the art of origami in paper sculpture. Although these objects unfold in the real three-dimensional space and produce plays of light and shadow, they are primarily made of scriptural media. Their aesthetic construction and complex ontology are based on the exploration of the possibilities of fusion and transference between the world of the form and the world of the letter in the material sense, that of the book, the folio, the page, and the paper. Therefore, like the Persian picture they fall into the broad category of chirography.

An origami compressed and flattened on a folio could form a set of geometric shapes and fractioned imagery quite analogous or associable to some Persian paintings, particularly the most deconstructivist specimens (Figs. 29, 38). As with the latter, in pop-up book images and origami the internal hollowness between the paper parts does not have, aesthetically, the consistence of space. Instead, it is an absence that, in the case of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic origami, generates the utter poetic paradox of signifying the solid presence of flesh without representing it. In origami architecture and pop-up book

imagery as well, the actual three-dimensional space turned aesthetic void transfigures the combination of shadowy cutouts and white, colored, or painted paper walls into the negative-positive effect of the writing's dark trace on the page's blankness.<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, if owing to their three-dimensionality these chirographies are objectively distinct from the essentially two-dimensional Persian picture, there is definitely in the latter's aesthetic physics something along the order of objecthood as well. Like paper sculpture, the Persian figuration constitutes an aesthetic transliteration on the folio's flatness of a conglomerate of materials of different natures, solid or soft, fluid or semi-fluid, thin or thick, an object-structure of variegated textures and substances transubstantiated in the image's plane: image-cloud, image-lava, image-marquetry, image-quilt, image-collage, and so on, akin to some Frank Stella or Robert Rauschenberg object-paintings. The Persian representations similarly display tactile edges and etched rims whose regular or irregular contours can be followed by means of a virtual touch of the fingertip. For example, in the virtuality of the aesthetic experience of a famous representation of the *mi'raj* (Prophet Muhammad's night journey to the heavens), one can feel the pointy edge and particular materiality of the angels' wings sticking out of the frame.<sup>57</sup> One may also virtually hold the thin sticks of the frame and pull them apart from the image to dismantle the whole thing into separate pieces (here is a good example of deconstructivism). This illusionist feature of objecthood indeed implies the aesthetic notion of three-dimensionality, but only outside the Persian image-object, not inside it where the scriptural space and chirographic formations reign.

### **Chirographic Aggregation, Rhythmic Orchestration, and Organic Movement**

The Persian picture's multiple internal breakages, scissions, segmentations, folds, deployments, and extrapolations pertain to these attributes of objecthood, materiality, and tactility, which it shares with works of penmanship and paper sculpture. These highly qualitative features create a particular aesthetic of "aggregation." I borrowed the latter word from David Roxburgh who employs it in his studies to relay the variegated effects of form and content with collage, compilation, and the collection of images used in making Persianate albums.<sup>58</sup> However, in this discussion I mean to expand this word's semantic to convey another meaning more specifically adapted to the scriptural structure of Persian representation. Here "aggregation" precisely signifies the process of accumulation of forms that reiterate, on the pictorial surface, the aggregative phenomenology of word-marking and tracing that

constitutes and institutes the physical-material gesture of writing. But how does aggregation thus defined operate in Persian painting?

In its doubly congregative and segregative principle, the Persian compartmented iconography variously arranged in compaction, extension, retraction, alternation, or alignment translates in the figuration the inner structure of the writing's sequential morphology made of aggregated units of multiple formats, letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, texts, subtexts, chapters, annotations, notes, and so on. As in written tracery, line changes and spacing modulations variably arrange the painted blocks to form the pictorial text, thereby creating ever-changing borders. In this sense the iconographic organization mirrors certain calligraphic occurrences that analogously play with a variety of formal aggregated constructions forcing the beholder to change bodily position or move the manuscript in different directions to read the text. But this aspect of Persian painting mirrors the composition of poetry relying on variegated rhythms of the tongue and different verse scansions. For example see, or more accurately stare, at this poem's morphology from the *Diwan* of Nasir I-Khusraw:

Were the turns of the Wheel of Fortune proportioned to  
worth alone  
O'er the Vault of the Lunar Heaven would have been my  
abode and throne.  
But no! For the worth of Wisdom is lightly esteemed in  
sooth,  
By fickle Fate and Fortune, as my father warned me in  
youth.  
Yet knowledge is more than farms, and estates, and rank,  
and gold;  
Thus my dauntless spirit, whispering, me consoled:  
With a heart more brightly illumined than ever the Moon  
can be  
What were a throne of glory o'er the Sphere of the Moon  
to thee?  
To meet the foeman's falchion and Fate's close-serried  
field  
Enough for me are Wisdom and Faith as defence and  
shield.<sup>59</sup>

This fragmented constitution of the Persian image indeed bears this other dimensional feature of the poetic aesthetic, as well as of music with which the latter has many parallels—that is, the rhythm. As in the expressions of the verb and the sound, the Persian figural unfolding becomes rhythmic movement under the combined creative forces of variation, repetition, shifts, and other modes of control of the forms' dynamic based on mathematical regulation. Similar to the mastered flow of letters in calligraphy syntactically and mathematically organized around points of compulsion and pulsation,

tension and suspension, departure and rupture, the figurative spread on the folio's surface revolves around meaningfully placed loci of eruptions and pauses, breath and apneas, fluxes and refluxes, energy and stillness, and so on (Fig. 1, 28–9, 37).

Instrumental to this rhythmic orchestration are the plays of contrasts between aesthetic tendencies and countertendencies, forces and counterforces, directions and counterdirections that in the Persian picture configure variegated pictorial synergies and kinetic instantiations. The wide range of aesthetic oppositions includes contrasts of bright colors, the insertion in a richly textured palette of minimalist white-and-black patterns producing popping out effects, and countless combinations of antithetical shapes and lines. For example, sharp, angular, static, and ultra-flat geometrical shapes slice through soft, curvy, dynamic, volumetric, and formless designs, thus enhancing the iconography's rhythmic opticality. Scenes mixing architectural and landscape representation provide an ideal setting to obtain such effects, as the purposely uncluttered and sketchy geometry of the architecture kinetically clashes with the textured lumpiness, sinuosity, and nebulosity of the elements of Nature.

Yet another kind of movement, seemingly less orchestrated in the sense of less regulated and more improvised and fluid than this structural-compositional rhythm, contributes as strongly to enliven the Persian image. This movement I term "organic" springs from the dynamism inherent in some plastic forms that, like the written bodies in calligraphy, are given an inner energy of pure aesthetic essence that has to do with the naturalistic representation of biological life. I have begun already to touch upon this aspect of the Persian pictoriality in discussing the figural expansions and overflows presenting the illusionist aesthetic qualities of organic materials of variegated substances and textures. The pairing of the geometric kineticism with these substances' progressions in spontaneous and eruptive movement participates in the ontological definition of the Persian image as an object-like fiction with a life of its own.

#### *INNER LIFE OF THE FORMS*

The biological term "organic" refers, among other things, to the developmental processes of formation and transformation that structure the organisms' life in Nature. Those processes implicate a unique kind of movement inscribed in time, that of becoming and evolving from appearance to disappearance. In the fictive spatiotemporality of art, an analogous developmental and transformational movement animates the Persian pictorial matter and lends it the character of an aesthetic organism in actual or potential activity. The cracks, gaps, and openings purposely left in the process of plastic aggregation, the systematic iconographic crossings, overflowings, and trespassings at the

image's periphery, the sprawling, fraying, swelling, or shrinking borders, the chipped edges and broken frames unsettle the very certitude of the Persian image as a stable and completed aesthetic object-event.<sup>60</sup> This image is rather something on the order of the presentation or capture of a pictorial state, an entity in a latent, imminent, or active unfolding, a metamorphosis, efflorescence, or deliquescence in progress, or a fragment suggesting "a lost totality or one yet to come."<sup>61</sup>

Fragile fugacity or more solid block of figuration, the Persian picture possesses the utterly poetic aura of the indeterminacy, uncertainty, instability, and transientness of a work in becoming (*en devenir*) whose outcome, lost in virtuality, unforeseeable and unpredictable, is only imaginable. Openness, indefiniteness, incompleteness define those pictorial instances in "that delightful state, when farther beauty is known to be at hand, and when, while much is actually given to the sight, more yet remains for the imagination," to quote again Jane Austen's delicate poetry.<sup>62</sup> Thus devoid of the character of stability, certitude, and firmness of these pictorial entities that aesthetically posit themselves as tangible facts, the surging Persian picture bears intrinsically the possibility of its own disappearance, self-dissolution, or self-disaggregation. Springing up from books and albums, the paintings are like, in the literature of *Tlön's* northern hemisphere in Jorge Luis Borges's story, "ideal objects, which are convoked and dissolved in a moment, according to poetic needs."<sup>63</sup> Even the most compact and dense compositions, deceptively complete and solid, convey the promise of an explosion into an atomic multitude or an implosion into deliquescence (Fig. 30).

In the early Safavid period, these powerful organic properties of forms were explored to their fullest expressive potential. They serve an ebullient pictoriality, a transfixing imagery of an announced aesthetic cataclysm created by an exacerbation of the phenomenology of the eruptive with seismic movements of forms, hyper-kinetic bursts of colors, rapturously blasting, volcanically foaming, loftily pirouetting, splashing, spilling ... (Figs. 1, 33–4, 37).

Whispery or convulsive, opaque or crystalline, flamboyant or delicate, condensed or sprawling, self-contained or open, ultimately one does not know whether the Persian image will "either evaporate or crystallize," to paraphrase Gaston Bachelard.<sup>64</sup> Quintessentially fleeting, it is hallucinatory like a mirage, a looming eidolon or a sudden apparition, as doubtful, fugacious, and ephemeral as a reverie leaving the spectator transfixed, beyond belief.

#### *PICTURE-EVENT, PERFORMING-PERFORMATIVE IMAGE*

Such an image does not depict, describe, or represent an event, as it, itself, constitutes the event. Or better said, it is advent in painting. The represented narrative is only given through this extraordinary pictorial happening, often

coordinated in perfect timing with a specific textual excerpt in the illustrated manuscript that will make the story-reading and image-seeing coincide. It is in this precisely that a Persian picture is phenomenologically analogous to a poem, calligraphy, or musical piece. In the same way that these artistic occurrences only fully exist through the live performance, pronouncement, or play, a Persian picture acquires its artistic authority and rhetorical might at the instant of its delivery by means of its hyper-performative aesthetic phenomenality. It is a pictorial utterance rather than a picture, a visual voicing one could say, powerfully revelatory in the instantaneity of its gripping plainesthai, which warrants the quality of the appreciation, contemplation, reflection, meditation, and any other form of intellection the representation aims to incite and by which the works' profundities of meaning are ultimately attainable. Therefore, the same story or myth can be indefinitely reenacted, replayed and re-portrayed in words, forms, or sounds, each occurrence-advent bringing about an exclusive presentation of it, always disclosing unprecedented significances and arousing unexpected emotions. Therefore, one could compare the Persian painters to "The metaphysicians of Tlön [who] do not seek for the truth or even for verisimilitude, but rather for the astounding. They judge that metaphysics is a branch of fantastic literature," and let us add, "fantastic painting."<sup>65</sup>

It is precisely because of this emphasis placed on a phenomenology of epiphanic delivery that the acts of repetition and reiteration by no means amount to redundancy in the Persian context. Quite the contrary, as in poetry and music they boost inventiveness and creative interpretation through the endless re-performing of the same act. The aesthetic appreciation of works incessantly illustrated, such as the *Shahnama*, is thus always renewed. For if the Persian picture functions within the framework of an elaborate apparatus of conventions and norms, at the same time it is expected to unveil its beauty and newness through the stupefying process of its aesthetic giving. To conclude, the Persian picture communicates in revealing and impacting: it is logos in hyper-dialectics with pathos.<sup>66</sup>

As much as the Mughals cultivated Persian language, literature, and art, those pictorial intangibles, indeed sublimely poetic but with no firm grip on the earthly ground and the here-and-now of people's lives, did not quite suit the empirical mode of world-apprehension they acquired by contact and immersion in the Indian milieu. As a result, Persian pictorial poetry did not stay intact durably in the aesthetic consciousness of Mughal image-makers, who also wanted to see in the paintings the faithful reflection of their world's reality and the documentary of their life events and temporal preoccupations. How then was the Persian paradigm satisfactorily readjusted, processed, and consequently hybridized according to the Indo-Mughal "cultural optics"?<sup>67</sup>

### Mughal Retention and Deconstruction of the Persian Paragon

As previously demonstrated, living on the subcontinent and mixing with its peoples had changed the Mughals' "style of seeing."<sup>68</sup> The internalizing gaze regime informed by the Persianate logocentric poetic culture inherited by the Mughals had mutated into an Indo-Mughal mode of seeing based on a more direct sensory experience of reality. This profound mutation of the Mughal visual consciousness entailed what I call the double process of rationalization and detextualization of the Persian image, although a great deal of its iconographic vocabulary and phenomenality was retained and maintained. By "detextualizing" I mean reassigning to the painting its primary iconic function in replacement of the sematographic-verbal function usually assumed by encoded images meant to be experienced analogously to texts and speeches.<sup>69</sup> As to "rationalization," it signifies the reshaping of the pictorial construction in order to give it structural attributes in basic analogy with the natural laws and appearances. This presupposes an aesthetic conception of the picture presenting its content as if it were an event happening in concrete reality.<sup>70</sup>

The slippage from *poesis* to *mimesis* observed in the Sultanate production can be considered the starting point of this double process of detextualization and rationalization of the image.<sup>71</sup> In the Akbari era, this slippage gained in determination and effectiveness under the decisive impulse of the deconstructive reworking of the contemporary Persian models in the challenging double pursuit of emulating their dreamy plasticity and inscribing representation in the sphere of concreteness. Indeed, if the variegated Akbari imagery does include creations faithful to the Persian criteria and draws massively from the rich Persian spectrum of forms and iconography, it nevertheless reveals a consistent endeavor to change the picture's ontology in order to meet the Mughals' specific desire to contemplate, feel, and showcase the lived world in painting (Figs. 5, 21, 34, 39). The many images focusing on real-life themes and mixing the Indian landscape and cityscape with references to the Persian visual-cultural context, and completed with a lively stylistic expression, clearly manifest this desire. However, to understand this Mughal aesthetic direction, the question to ponder is that of the proceedings of the rationalization of the pictorial metaphysics, or the view of the world projected through the picture's conceptual structure.

Three main strategies of deconstruction of the Persian sematography were implemented to carry out the Mughal project of re-anchoring representation in the factual world: the tempering and eventual suppression of the Persian aesthetic of oneirism, the reintroduction of the plastic trope of iconic space, and the reconceptualization of human representation in perceptual accordance to Nature. But sorting out these complex strategies necessitates a careful writing plan. While the first strategy is dealt with within this section and the second

one in the series of sections that follow it, the third strategy partakes of the subjects treated in next chapter.

*FILTERING OUT THE ONEIRIC AND ANY VISUAL AMBIGUITY*

In Persian painting, the oneiric aesthetic relies not only on plastic indeterminacy but also on the quality of “visual ambiguity” that characterizes other arts similarly detached from the mundane.<sup>72</sup> Western Modern artists like Odilon Redon, studied with mastery by Dario Gamboni, play in the same way with the utterly poetic potency of iconographic and semantic opacities that fashion the picture into a visual mystery or a kind of enigma to decipher.<sup>73</sup> In these cases of Persian and Western painting, the aesthetic ambiguity is owing to a wide range of surreal and fantastical elements that stratify the imagery with subterranean layers, subliminal patterns, hidden meanings, potential images, and other slippery, multivalent, and elusive registers too improbable and disorienting for the rational mind. For example, both arts resort to the poetic strategy of animating the inanimate and giving a hidden life to naturally inorganic matter in anthropomorphic and zoomorphic elements of landscape. Cryptomorphic imagery can reach tremendous complexity in Persian miniature<sup>74</sup> (Fig. 30).

The philosophical conflict with the more rationalist Mughal conception of the picture generated by this Persian psychedelic representational mode naturally commanded the return to clear iconographic legibility, semiotic univocality, and semantic transparency allowing a direct access to meaning



34 *Anvari Entertains in a Summer House* (painting, verso; text, recto), attributed to Basawan, 1588. Folio 109 from a manuscript of the *Divan of Anvari*. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum. Photo: Imaging Department. © President and Fellows of Harvard College

and sparing the viewer from the guessing game.<sup>75</sup> To achieve this objective without giving up the visual lyricism of the wondrous late Timurid-Safavid aesthetic, the Akbari *kitabkhana's* artists opted for a progressive taming and stifling of these riddle-like patterns that in arousing imagination, attracting the wandering mind and stimulating a projective intellection prevent the apprehension of the image as a concrete aesthetic proposition “conveying determined perceptions and interpretations,” to quote Gamboni.<sup>76</sup> Over time the Mughal artists eliminated these elements. The Mughal interpretive implementation of the Persian model indeed betrays a leaning against anything ambiguous and indefinite as well as much less fondness for the optical games of metamorphism, polymorphism, and anamorphism. By the same token, the Mughals clearly show a preference for “Cartesian” shapes and straightforward geometry at the images’ periphery.

A sweeping comparative glance at Persian and Akbari imperial artifacts suffices to grasp these subtle but highly significant Mughal alterations, which at the same time do not compromise the application of the Persian structural principles used for picturing fundamental registers such as landscape and architecture. In Akbari imperial painting, the composition follows *grosso modo* the Persian scheme relying on piled up sinuous lineaments and variegated geometric shapes arranged in a towering order and spreading over the pictorial plane in great lyrical deployments. However, crucially, in detail the depictions of nature and culture are at the same time submitted to reason and transform the scenes’ setting into a more stable and practicable earthly ground on which things and beings stand more firmly (Figs. 6, 11–12, 20–21).

The most surrealist of Persian iconographic elements—namely, the metamorphic and anamorphic landscape as the site of subliminal visions and crypto-images—has its parallel in the Akbari imperial imagery but is subtly remodeled.<sup>77</sup> In the Persian context, spectral creatures not immediately discernable inhabit a kind of underworld hidden under the pictorial surface, a latent or dormant second layer of life doubling the scenes’ apparent world. This underworld does not exist in the universe of Mughal imagery where everything is visible, on the surface. The subterranean figural motifs taking shape from the rock reliefs’ edges and hiding in their folds elements that Mughal painting indeed contains are however only iconographic residues. They constitute replicated formulas that in the process of transference in the Mughal space have lost a great deal of their original magic-oneiric power as their plastic treatment deemphasizes their presence and diminishes their rhetorical capacity (Figs. 18–21).

In the Mughal picture, surreal creatures paradoxically appear visible and mingle in their environment but are barely noticeable, subdued by the simplified patterns and stifling line contours of the earthy and rocky motifs that foster them. This use of the drawing seems to aim at reasserting the original geological and inorganic nature of these landscape motifs at the

expense of the oneiric quality and mysteriousness this type of figuration was meant to instill the image with in Persian pictorial context. More and more out of place in the more down-to-earth ambience of Mughal painting, ghost figures and looming monsters beneath the surface of pristine sceneries with no declared linkage with the illustrated story were to slowly freeze in the Mughal image's design, and eventually to vanish. Over time, only paintings illustrating a story about monsters would depict monstrous beings. For in the Mughal imagistic system (distinct from the picture's content) characterized by semantic univocity and a certain amount of plastic truthfulness to reality, otherworldly creatures have no reason to enter the pictorial field if they do not participate directly in the narrative depicted.

The same observation applies to the highly oneiric lava-like or cloud-like swelling patterns and the impossible architectural levitations so dear to the Persian pictoriality. The endeavor to circumscribe, tame, and control these figural extrapolations is perceptible in the Mughal rendering of the mountains, hills, and rock profiles that visibly aspire to reinstitute the terrestrial reign of firmer delineations. In inevitable contradiction with the Mughal spectator's positivist expectations at the level of the representations' conceptual framework, this Persian iconography appears significantly deflated or weakened in the Akbari works. Over time they too became residual elements of the Persian aesthetic. Surreal deployments could be unreservedly represented only if they partook of the opus's subject matter, as, for example, in the popular scene of Lord Krishna lifting up the Govardhana Mountain with his own body. Frequently pictured in Indian painting in general, one Mughal specimen attributed to Miskin (c. 1585–90) portrays this fantastical event by picturing an enormous hill in levitation above the Hindu God, which recalls the Persian geological fantasies. However, the representation's conceptual structure conforms to the rationalizing Akbari mode of image construction based on a naturalist repartition of the earthly and celestial planes, while the entirety is framed by sealed borders functioning like an optical window open onto a three-dimensional spatial continuum.<sup>78</sup> In sum, the work represents an otherworldly story with the appearance of the observable truth of this world.

#### *AFFIRMATION OF BASIC LAWS OF PHYSICS*

Inside the picture as well, the Akbari deconstructive method works at morphing Persian designs into minimally verisimilar depictions. The architectural and object representations, buildings, cityscape, tents, carpets, furniture, and so on, as in the Persian models, build sprawling patterned figurations and geometric networks. However, they appear characteristically surrounded or immersed in three-dimensional settings such as dense vegetation and trees or remote cityscapes meandering in the landscape's depth (Figs. 5–6, 11–12, 20–21, 34). The architecture and urban designs do mix hyper-flat geometrical abstraction

in the Persian fashion with more textured renderings of volume and light and shadow, solid and void, and so on, but they let the more distinctively mimetic iconography assert elementary notions of physics in the images' composition such as gravity and mass. They thus help secure the shaping role of mimesis in the work's aesthetic metaphysics while keeping effective the visual power of pure geometrical shapes. Two defining features of the Mughal picture result from these plastic manipulations.

The first feature is the aesthetic dialecticism and hyper-dialecticism that the representations' two-dimensional and three-dimensional layouts and their corollaries, the idealistic and realistic plasticity, necessarily create. Depending on the pictorial configurations, the dialectic tension may vary considerably in intensity. Sometimes they show extreme levels of hyper-dialectics whereby none of these modes of expression have a dominant grasp of the images, making their ontological definition either impossible or open to all possibilities.

The second feature is that despite or because of this dialecticism, in the Mughal pictorial environment the aesthetic status of the Persian plasticity inexorably slips from compositional model to mere iconographic insertion. The second main strategy of deconstruction of the Persian paradigm, the introduction of the iconic space in the picture, is instrumental in this process.

### **Mutation of the Pictorial-Scriptural Plane into a Penetrable Space**

The mimetic restructuring of the picture's physics by means of space representation partakes of the Mughal strategies of the detextualization and rationalization of the Persian model. Akbar or any of his artists could have uttered as a thought of his own Robert Delaunay's famous slogan, "depth is the new inspiration."<sup>79</sup> Indeed, from its inception and throughout its evolution, the Akbari imperial production consistently worked at finding ways to give images illusionist qualities. Diverse space-creating devices and depth-alluding patterns are inserted within the pictorial fabric generally arranged in the Persian fashion (Figs. 5–6, 17–20). Although quite innovative on the stylistic level, this Mughal introduction of spatial depth must be viewed as the logical outcome of the pre-Mughal Indian history of mimetic initiatives in art. The Mughal quest and conquest of depth were the latest in a series of steps toward pictorial mimesis made over time in the Indo-Muslim artistic sphere, the previous realizations in that direction including the plastic vitalism and body-centric aesthetic of Sultanate book art.

The Mughal experiments with the iconic space, like those with the human figure to be studied afterwards, definitely bespeak the availability of new techniques. These experiments were made in the framework of the acquisition of the late Timurid-Safavid *savoir faire* that, combined with the local traditions

of painting, supplied the Mughal pictorial project with a rich array of plastic tools and technical stimuli, independently of the European artistic influx. That is how, I believe, the Mughal aesthetic idea of representing three-dimensional space was formed and applied by means of various methods that sustained the Mughal restructuring of the Persian sematography into a picture more rationally constructed. Among the variegated Mughal devices used to give the figuration a sense of depth, three stand out: sky iconography, the framing logic, and the organizing principle of the figural continuum.

*ATMOSPHERIC SKIES AND VITAL SPACE*

To begin with the first device, in the aesthetic consciousness in general, sky iconography creates tight correlations with the visual concept of iconic space. Akbari painting clearly shows the Mughals' awareness of these correlations as well as their interest in thoroughly exploiting them in order to reconceptualize an image's metaphysics (Figs. 5–6, 13–14, 17–20). In fact, the portrayal of the celestial sphere distinguishes the Persian and Akbari picture from one another and highlights their different painting philosophies.

As a general rule, in Persianate iconography the aerial element forms a chirographic pattern like the rest of the figural vocabulary, even though by no means does this conception exclude slippages here and there toward a more iconic picturing of the theme.<sup>80</sup> The Persian pictorial skies present extremely diverse aspects such as a solid-blue plane, a flat-gold field or an opaque-colored area patterned with Chinese clouds and astral motifs (Figs. 32–4, 41). As previously noted, sometimes the firmament is not depicted but suggested by default, by letting the folio's blankness appear around and through the figuration (Figs. 32–5). When a more textured effect does bring a touch of naturalism to the motif, its capacity for representing depth in the picture is often neutralized by various space-denying means—for example, by allowing two-dimensional iconographic elements to slash through it and trespass the image's frame. From a rational viewpoint, trees cannot rise in the sky and let their branches cross the picture's upper borders, nor can celestial creatures have their wings sticking out of the frame that delimitates the depiction of the heavens they are flying through (Fig. 40). Nor can the same architectural representations possibly form in continuum the skyline of a cityscape inside the image and the decorative patterns outside of it in the folio's margins. These iconographic occurrences only reassert the chirographic qualities of the Persian picture's sematographic structure. Consequently, it is only in a signaleptic manner that this picture represents the firmament in the sense that it "names" it by means of ideographic codes. Notably, thus portrayed, the aerial element does not open the Persian pictorial matter to the iconic space.

By significant contrast, Akbari sky iconography does open the pictorial field to this type of space. From the beginning of Akbar's reign, a consistent systematic process of morphing the Persian celestial ideograms into naturalistic heavens clearly signals the Mughal intent to involve spatial depth in the imagistic layout. If the iconographic infringements of the boundary between the pictorial perimeter and the folios' margins in the Persian style do not disappear during this period of Mughal painting, they steadily rarify and progressively lose the deconstructive power they characteristically exert in Persian context, tending to become in this way pure plastic adornments. Due to this efficient strategy of neutralization of this aspect of the Persian aesthetic, the iconic space could settle into the image.

Akbari painting displays a wide range of atmospheric effects imitating the celestial vault's versatile appearances. It systematically incorporates in the representational scheme the mimetic concept of physical differentiation between the terrestrial and celestial planes. Plain aerial color washes or more painterly applications, blindly abyssal or crossed by flights of birds and fluffy clouds—these renditions of the firmament pierce, puncture, and rip the painting's fabric with spatial apertures of variegated scale. Fissures, breaches, or wider openings thus let the three-dimensional space penetrate the picture and transform the Persian marquetry-like graphic separation between earth and heavens into the scopic motif of a horizon.<sup>81</sup> The Mughal painted scenes thereby aesthetically enter the penetrable and traversable space of our world, filled with Persian stylized elements though they may be (Figs. 5–6, 11–12, 21, 31).

Here the comparison with fifteenth-century Dutch painting again comes to mind. The early Northern Renaissance works deepen and widen claustrophobic and compressed architectural interiors by allowing a glance at the firmament's profundities through elements of landscape visible in the glass windows' aperture or in side-door scenes of outside. In an analogous way, the Akbari naturalistic or quasi-naturalistic celestial sphere tears the images' two-dimensional chirographic canvas and opens it out to the world's infinite depth.

The very gesture of picturing the key theme of the skies imitatively has sufficed to initiate the ontological mutation of the Akbari picture from imagistic text/object-image to iconic reflection of the mundane. By inference, it significantly contributed to the shift of its cognitive status from image of primal linguistic function to image of primal iconic function. Although two-dimensional plasticity and sematographic reiterations in the Persian fashion still heavily load Akbari figuration, the presence alone of these spatial zones activates the mighty forces of the dialectics between visual poetics and mimesis, and between textualized and imitative imagery, with a firm inflection toward the latter.

Such a deconstructive and mutational process could not fail to dismantle the Persian sematographic grid that organizes the composition of early

Mughal masterpieces. Various degrees of amplitude of this dismantlement can be observed depending on the importance of the structural assignation of sky depiction in the image, discrete or more invasive, and on the intensity of the stylistic realism applied to iconographic details such as trees or buildings. Whatever the tenor or emphasis of the aesthetic dialecticism and the proportions of the sematographic structure's dislocation, the fact remains that these verisimilar skies have the ability to disempower the space-negating principle that is the infallible continuous delineation of form (*tarh, disegno*) dear to both Persian and Mughal painting. The imperial Akbari production, including the most intricate of its specimens, is thus lent in an early stage of its development qualities of palpability, penetrability, and immersibility. The beholder can virtually "enter" the images or at least some areas of them, whereas the impenetrable Persian picture implicates an experience of distant and internalized spectatorship, that is, a "disincarnated" apprehension of it that does not allow a virtual bodily projection inside the representation.

*THE MAN AND THE SQUIRRELS BY ABU'L-HASAN*

A later work from around 1605–1608 (beginning of Jahangir's reign, 1605–27), Abu'l-Hasan Ibn Aqa Riza's celebrated picture of squirrels climbing a tree, epitomizes this Mughal deconstructive manipulation of the Persian portrayal of the celestial topic, as it displays side by side the two picturing modes in a non-obvious and therefore most interesting, telling fashion<sup>82</sup> (Fig. 39). The acclaimed artist of Iranian origin Abu'l-Hasan was trained in the Safavid pictorial tradition by his father, Aqa Riza. But born in Jahangir's household, he was imbued with Mughal artistic ideas.

For this masterpiece of Persian-Mughal aesthetic hybridity, the painter chose to apply a swath of solid-gold to the scene's background above the landscape. This typical hyper-flat Persian feature enhances in a game of contrast the lively rendering of the animals and the figure at the bottom of the majestic tree in the foreground. Yet, the golden field does not reach the image's top, which features a narrow ribbon of blue sky.<sup>83</sup> Though undersized, this aerial element by its presence alone constitutes an "operator of elevation" and spatialization in the picture, as it signals a strong intent to integrate the physical reality of space into the scene.<sup>84</sup> This device definitely constitutes a powerful marker of the Mughal positivist aesthetic consciousness. In addition, a careful arrangement of the landscape in successive and continuous receding layers sustains this process by producing a tangible sense of depth unfolding, despite the strong anti-space and screen effect of the golden blind field in the background. One may conclude that in Abu'l-Hasan's masterpiece the "Mughalization" of the Safavid manner relies on "a revision of the conditions of the appearance of the cloud [celestial iconography] as a landscape feature," to paraphrase Hubert Damish, for the double purpose of mirroring Nature while preserving admired attributes of the Persian fantastical pictoriality.<sup>85</sup>

### European Celestial Imagery in the Mughal Skies

Apart from having introduced space and depth in the image, the Mughal verisimilar celestial vault also constituted a privileged locus of plastic experiment per se, particularly experiments of hybridization between variegated stylistic and symbolic expressions. No other miniature from the Islamic world has placed as much emphasis on the theme of the celestial vault in terms of both formal appearance and cognitive status. A panoramic viewing of Mughal painting from all periods suffices to disclose this theme as a major component of the image's world-fusion type of metaphysics and a privileged pictorial space for symbolic elaboration (Figs. 3, 8, 13, 16).



35 *Courtier Awaiting Akbar's Command*, attributed to Basawan, c. 1575. Mughal India. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Stuart Cary Welch Collection, 2009.202.55. Photo: Imaging Department. © President and Fellows of Harvard College

Initially an aerial aperture onto the existential world, these celestial representations and their optical basis, the horizon, have unceasingly expanded and diversified their aesthetic function, iconography, and meaning in tight correlation with the paintings' genre, content, and narrative, be they tales, histories, religious events, genre scenes, portraits, or allegories. Vaporous cloudy formations with angels crowning the ruler, galactic spaces deployed above earthly landscapes, and remote skylines of cityscapes receding from the scenes' foreground count among the most recognizable markers of Mughal painting. But remarkably, this increasingly naturalistic area of the Mughal image became the recipient of the most characteristic European Christian iconography, a phenomenon that famously climaxed with the daring representation of God the Father emerging from the heavens in a Shahjahani painted folio (Fig. 14). Very well known, it is not necessary to further describe this variegated figural vocabulary inspired by European prints and paintings circulating throughout Asia in early Modern times. It is, however, the scholarly interpretation of it as an instance of aesthetic hybridity that invites one to further probe the celestial thematic in Mughal painting.

The Mughal appropriation of the Renaissance and Baroque iconography has led art historians to monolithically attribute the creation, conceptualization, and portrayal of heavenly settings in Mughal painting to the "influence" of European art. This interpretation simply ignores the purely Mughal conceptual underpinnings of the images, or more accurately their two foundations, the hyperdialectical approach of the Persian paradigm and the creative continuation of the Sultanate legacy in the Mughal milieu. While clearly the Mughal portrayal of the celestial element grew more complex, sophisticated, and iconographically more hybrid due to the influx of European imagery, this does not mean that *the idea* of it (of the sky) as both a mimetic structural motif and premise of metaphysical and symbolic expression is to be credited to this influx as well. In other words, the firmament in Mughal painting did not become naturalist nor eagerly reflect European-Christian artistry because of a supposed Western influence or "occidentalization" of its original Persianate substrate.<sup>86</sup> Early Akbari paintings as well as subimperial works showing no signs of European input display aerial renderings bespeaking the intent of translating in imitative plastic terms what Gaston Bachelard has famously called the "aerial imagination"<sup>87</sup> (Fig. 20, 31).

I have described my views on the Sultanate source of the Mughal pictorial mimesis, but another important contention must be added and explained. The Mughals' remarkable reception of the European plastic vocabulary above all results from a convergence of similar aesthetic interests and vision for painting in the two cultures. These common interests, which I term "aesthetic affinities" in giving a *clin d'oeil* to Goethe's concept of "elective affinities," revolve around the centrality of the body and space in the representational conceptualization. A statement about Renaissance art by Hubert Damish

perfectly applies to Mughal painting: “In the figurative regime instituted by the Renaissance [Akbari visual culture], the representativity of the iconic sign, like that of the representation itself, is governed by a combination of the various meanings that enter into the definition of the word representation: (re)production, evocation, substitution, and so on.”<sup>88</sup> The French art historian then provides a clarification that could not better fit the Mughal case, “This structure is clearly detectable in many works of indefinite status.”<sup>89</sup> Owing to its aesthetic hybridity, Akbari painting indeed comprises “many works of indefinite status” yet, in it as in Renaissance art, “this structure is clearly detectable.”

Furthermore, although with different plastic methods and results, both early Modern Mughal and European painting forged their aesthetic by rationalizing and detextualizing inherited imagistic prototypes conceived as a figural tongue, a countertext or a visual substitute to writing similarly codified by means of disincarnated figural signs. These models are respectively late Timurid-Safavid miniature and medieval European painting, both falling under the double sign of textuality and aesthetic idealism.<sup>90</sup>

The intellectual mechanisms that produced the Renaissance pictorial philosophy are well known, but one cannot say the same about Mughal art—I have proposed some explanations, yet the question remains open to reflection. Nevertheless, the essential point to retain from this discussion is that the two cultures followed parallel aesthetic-conceptual directions independently from one another, that is, under the impulse of the inner logic of their respective cultural-historical evolutions. Thus the Mughals’ positivist or rational aesthetic tendency, derived from the foregrounding of the body and the sensory experience in centuries-old Indian culture, was internally maturing apart from the Mughal-European encounter in early Modern Asia. Therefore, contrary to general opinion, this Mughal tendency was not a consequence of the latter encounter.

Due to this shared aesthetic philosophy, European-Mughal cultural contact engendered in the framework of Mughal art what I call “a symbiosis by artistic affinity” between both pictorial expressions. The hybrid and naturalistic portrayal of the celestial element in Mughal miniature epitomizes this symbiosis and the Mughals’ open reception and sensitive appreciation of European art. In sum, if the Mughal images’ abyssal skies were such a welcoming place to foster, interpret, and develop the European thematic of celestial splendor, heavenly symbolism, and other cosmic raptures, it is only because the Mughals themselves had already correlated the aerial element and the domain of the mystical both plastically and symbolically.

I now return to Akbari strategies of space representation. Like the approach to sky iconography, the framing logic also took a mimetic turn in Mughal painting against the Persian model.

### From Image-Object to Framed View

Theoretically, in painting, frames and borders are pivotal to the construction of both the aesthetic physics and metaphysics of the object.<sup>91</sup> Given the nature of the Persian frame, the Mughal rationalization of the Persian imagistic system could not omit a reconceptualization of this essential part of the picture. Indeed, in the light of my previous analyses, it is clear that in Persian painting the frame does not behave rationally, so to speak. It does not function as an optical device mimicking in pictoriality the limits of a view onto something from a natural viewpoint—that is, like the open-window frame through which one sees “a framed scene” unfolding in a seemingly infinite or indefinite continuous space. The frame-image relationship that such a device engages posits by definition the absolute independence of the two entities inasmuch as it does not interfere in the representation’s inner organization. Contrary to this scheme, the Persian framing apparatus does interfere in it. Here a more detailed look at the latter will be useful.

In the Persian picture, due to its particular aesthetic morphology as image-object or image-substance, the frame constitutes the physical limit or border of the representation itself, as opposed to the optical limit of its viewing (Figs. 1, 28, 32, 40). Accordingly, it forms an integral component of the image’s structure and design. The Persian frame is indeed endowed with a full capacity to control, regulate, or modulate the figural spread in multiple ways. Just as the invisible grid and morphological edge of the calligraphic plane commands the dynamic of the scriptural flow, often the Persian frame synergistically interacts with the figuration, giving the pulse and impulse to its internal movement. One could describe these proceedings using the metaphor of the container as the frame, and its content as the iconography. When hermetically or quasi-hermetically sealed, the Persian pictorial enclosures retain and contain, or just crop the material inside that thus forms a compact lot. But when they are rickety, chipped, broken, unfinished, crossable, porous, or just open, they release the forces of the figural deployment that, depending on the nature of its substance, may surge out, soar, spill over, or wear away, generating formlessness in some parts of the picture (Figs. 1, 32–5). Following this logic, the frame may not exist at all (Fig. 37).

Finally, what is termed “frame” in the Persian picture corresponds to the polymorph contouring of the text-like body of painting that is the palpable borderline between the image and its absence (the non-form). As such, the Persian frame is the equivalent of the letters’ multishaped edges marking the writing’s presence in the scriptural medium’s blankness. It is only upon considering this particular conception of the frame, and by extension what resides inside, that one may explicate those Persian visual instantiations impossible and unthinkable in images conceived as framed views, like flags

slipping through the narrow interstice between two thin railings or trees soaring beyond the circumscription of a landscape representation (Fig. 28).

In view of their project of image construction in basic analogy with reality, it appears logical that the Mughals were compelled to abandon the “Persian manipulative frame” as I would define it, and adopt the illusionist device behind which space expands *ad infinitum*. The Mughal picture thus conceived could not put up with the Persian surreal intertwinements between the inside and outside of the representations without provoking an unsettling paradox and destabilizing their conceptual basis. But again, as with other Persian devices unsuitable to the Mughal pictorial vision, the switch was not abrupt. Encroaching and formless figurations were subjected to a gradual processing, from a diminished frequency of their appearance to a reduction to residues before reaching the ultimate stage of eradication.

An examination of the Akbari paintings’ frames reveals this Mughal interior conflict of interest that prevented a sharp shift of forms. Although the paintings show a preference for straight and neat framing profiles visibly aiming to remodel the image’s borders into a scopic opening; nevertheless, the Persian crossable frames are maintained. Transgressions of the principle of the framed view and hesitations in sealing the picture’s borders again betray the strong Mughal bond to the Persian aesthetic (Figs. 5, 11, 34). As expected then, the insistence on keeping Persian motifs sticking out beyond the image’s periphery does not fail to provoke paradox, dialectic, and sometimes a clash or dissonance, particularly in works that had already undergone an overall mimetic transmutation. One example, from the Walters Art Museum, illustrates well this phenomenon (Fig. 11). The painting represents a palace scene entirely conceptualized as a framed view, but at the upper right corner an aedicule protrudes from the golden railing. This encroachment forms an aesthetic countersense and even, it seems to me, appears rather superfluous, as it actually does not contribute much to the imagistic rhetoric. In this regard, it is symptomatic of the retention of Persian convention despite the obsolete character it may have in cases that have significantly broken away from the Persian prototypes.

Subsequent to the normalization of the optical frame is the skilful, playful and creative correlation between the inside and outside of the picture observed in late Jahangiri and Shahjahani painting. In following the concept of the framed view and in respecting the laws of iconic space representation, paradoxical configurations show scenes seen through an enclosed aperture surrounded by other figural formations deployed between the borders of the central picture and those of the folio medium that themselves function like an optical frame. Most impressive are the Shahjahani artifacts (or works reworked under Shah Jahan) that manage to expand the figurative field beyond and around the centerpiece within one and the same folio, while

maintaining the visibility and conceptual distinctiveness of the image's inner and outer aesthetic divide (Fig. 13).

With this key distinction between the inner and outer part of the picture asserted by the optical frame, another principle comes into play: that of the aesthetic exteriority and autonomy of the pictorial plane in relation to the manuscript's scriptural surroundings, whatever the content and nature of the semantic link between text and image. In artistic complexities involving this type of association, the status of autonomy of representation is highly implicative for the object's phenomenality and cognitivity as well as the phenomenology of beholding. In Mughal book art, the conceptualization of the image as a framed view has de facto entailed a dissociation of the artifact's imagistic and linguistic operations.

### The Frame as Instrument of Pictorial Autonomy

In Persian painting, the versatile framing devices do not erect an ontological boundary between writing and iconography since the figural originates from and resides in the folio's scriptural field. In contradistinction, the Mughal illusionist frame does separate, enclose, and insulate in order to define the two differentiated spatiotemporalities of text and image. Owing to this dissociative process, in Mughal miniature, the scriptural medium acquires the specific status of host. As such, it constitutes the frame of viewing and showcases the premises of the picture, just like any other site fostering autonomous and self-contained images in the domains of objects and architecture. In this sense, the Mughal book medium is analogous to, say, the Roman Church San Luigi dei Francesi, which showcases and frames the viewing of Caravaggio's "Calling of Saint Matthew," or the Museum of Modern Art in New York that does the same for Jasper Johns's American flag. By inference, the Mughal compound book-painting induces the same basic phenomenology of aesthetic perception as the latter examples, based on the experience of the binary spatiotemporality of the representation and its host. The phenomenological scenario unfolds as follows.

While in accordance with all Persianate miniatures the Akbari manuscripts belong to the category of scriptural media engaging specific processes of perception, prehension, and cognitivity related to the experience of textual material, they also equally function like a painting gallery. Similarly to what one experiences in a site displaying Western classical pictures—a gallery, church, or museum—the sight of an illustration in a Mughal book or folio creates a spatiotemporal shift by inviting the mind to immerse itself in the imaging fiction's spatiotemporality, distinct from the spatiotemporality of the host-medium-site of display, in the event the book's scriptural space. It thus provokes a suspension of the proceedings of book beholding. As the

eye and mind enter the representation's closed and enclosed world of pure iconicity, the sensations and feelings of this tactile world of paper and ink that is the manuscript are almost suppressed, just as any viewer of Caravaggio's painting dives into the virtual dark room where Jesus points toward Matthew with his extended arm and finger and, while doing so, momentarily forgets where he/she actually is. The process is the same with the museum for Jasper Johns's painting. Whether a building or a book, these mediums serve as a host that withdraws as the picture is viewed.

This phenomenon cannot/does not occur in the phenomenology of Persian book art and other artistic instances in which the spatiotemporality of what objectively constitutes the representation's host or medium and the spatiotemporality of this representation itself are not differentiated, as, for example, installations in situ in contemporary art or the Baroque Jesuit churches of Rome that blurrily and alternately conflate in one single sphere the architectural and pictorial spatiotemporality. In the Persian case, by virtue of the ontological-conceptual (not necessarily narrative) unicity formed by texts and images, the phenomenological proceedings occur within one and the same spatiotemporality: that of writing. With both the visual and textual material operating linguistically, the visual-textual encounter and apprehensive mode it induces are indivisible, so that if in the process of beholding that the practical modalities of perception obviously change when things are seen or read, cognitively the consciousness maintains continuous acute awareness of the verbal-scriptural nature of both the whole experience and its object.

#### *CALLIGRAPHIC CARTOUCHES AS SCREENS*

The two facts that in the Mughal illustrated folios the framing devices may contain inscriptions and that calligraphic cartouches may also appear within the pictorial area, as in the Persian models, cannot be a valid objection to the analysis above and its claims. Nor does the habit of writing inside the picture under the discrete and barely intrusive form of informative epigraphy, such as figures' names, artists' signatures, or short statements about the representation, unsettle the plastic autonomy of the Mughal picture. Quite the contrary, these facts only prove these claims. The Mughal general tendency posits that, whereas in the Persian sematography the figurations and calligraphic cartouches form a cemented whole of conpenetrations, juxtapositions, superimpositions, or collages, Mughal book art articulates texts and images in a basic mimetic-optic dual scheme defined by the structural opposition of three-dimensionality versus two-dimensionality. According to this scheme, the calligraphic plates form screens that partially obstruct the gazing at the figuration unfolding in depth and at distance behind them (Figs. 5, 13–14, 20).

This illusionist obstruction powerfully asserts the ontological divide and separation between the scriptural and the pictorial created by the Mughal rational frame. Instead of partaking of the image's inner construction as in Persian miniature, the text-boxes inserted in the figuration take on the aesthetic status of an object appearing *before* and *at distance* of the representation, similarly to a curtain veiling a view in the empirical world. In book art, this type of text-image organization has the faculty to invert the regular compositional scheme of the figural centerpiece surrounded by the scriptural field constituted by the folios' borders and margins, be it plain or decorated, and with or without inscriptions. According to this regular design, the margins manifest the scriptural nature of the painting's carrier, codex, or album. But in the case of screen-like calligraphic cartouches, the representation can equally assume this bearing function and mutate into writing bearer. Different configurations are possible and surely the Mughals explored all of them.

The text-boxes may be attached to the frame or may be unveiling or concealing part of the scene, as with window curtains and theater screens (Figs. 5, 20, 31). In such occurrences, they constitute an integral part of the optical framing device; therefore, they do not modify the scriptural/figural equation of the folio's composition, confirming aesthetically the role of the scriptural medium as the representation's host. But alternatively, the text-boxes may appear surrounded by figurations and thereby redistribute the functions of bearer and centerpiece. The calligraphy can form single or smaller cartouches floating in front of the picture like posters or Post-its stuck to a transparent glass sheet shielding the figural plane. It may also constitute the main centerpiece placed before an image occupying the entire surface of the folio, ingeniously transforming the latter into a pure pictorial field. Through this process, the margins acquire the authority of an iconic space and allow painting to virtually become the aesthetic host or medium of anything: writing, painting, and calligraphy.

In conclusion, the Mughal frame remapped the painting's medium into a polarized aesthetic geography in which the visual-iconic coexists with but does not coextend the verbal-scriptural, both being bound by a relationship of interrelation rather than correlation of meaning.

### **Corollary of the Framing Frame: The Figural Continuum**

Equally instrumental to the rehabilitation of the iconic space, the Mughals' embracing of the principle of figural continuum accompanied the normalization of the see-through framing device. Although not always easy to detect in the profuse plasticity of some Akbari artifacts, a strategy of unification and centralization of the iconography nonetheless slowly but surely disempowered the Persian polycentric, compartmented, and aggregative figuration. The Persian compositional system "*a tiroirs*" (multiple paintings in

one as with drawers in a bureau), or Russian doll-like nested scenes, was by definition unconcerned with the representational issue of spatial continuity.<sup>92</sup> Even the more ebullient and complex Mughal imbrications attest to the use of deconstructive effects of this Persian formula, as they more or less visibly or subtly submit the iconographic structure to “the powers of the continuum.”<sup>93</sup> Whether dense or more airy, the Akbari compositions strive by different means at neutralizing the forces of imagistic diversion and diffraction of the Persian aesthetic in order to form a more fluid and coherent figural flux. This phenomenon can be observed by looking at multiple Persian and Akbari artifacts (or all of those reproduced in this book).

A first strategy has consisted of a kind of readjustment made at the level of the picture’s content. More and more rarely, the Mughal images used the narrative formula of knitting independent side-stories or side-scenes into the main figural fabric, like the polycentric Persian imagery, in order to augment and complicate the main subject matter. As art historians have noted, the Mughal narrative thread is usually easier to follow despite the plastic intricacies.

A second cognizable strategy, of purely aesthetic order, has been the adoption of the monoscenic imagistic format that concentrates meaning and channels the consciousness on a single track instead of inviting it to venture in multidirectional journeys. In fact, the fragmented, unfixed, and sprawling aspects of the Persian elliptic aesthetic are in Mughal works compensated by the care placed on attaching the different iconographic portions in channeling concatenations, to the extent of the possible. The structuring principle of geometric sections persists and continues to be appreciated throughout the early Modern period, as it allows a rich display of events in avoiding figural chaos, obscurity, or confusion. However, at the same time the sequential rhythm characteristic of the Persian style appears significantly softened. The sharp contrasts of forms, colors, and movement that restlessly displace the eye from one focus to the other tend to be minimized in order to achieve a more even optical progression throughout the image. The Mughal palette in particular, as rich and nuanced as in Persian works but less bright and kinetic, greatly tones down the visual scansions and distributes more smoothly the forces of plastic opticality. Complementary colors are selectively applied, while the sheer range of naturalist nuance clearly demonstrates the Mughal choice of exploring the imitative capacity of the chromatic tool. Specialists discuss at length the subtle earthy tones conferring on the Mughal scenes a “natural look.”

To see for oneself this reworking of the Persian aggregative aesthetic, one only needs to compare and contrast by looking alternately at Persian and Akbari paintings. General features of compactedness, solidity, and perspicuity tend to replace the Persian discontinuous and multifocal imagery, specifically in hyper-dense representations. Used increasingly over time, the Mughal technique of terracing different pictorial planes from the foreground

to the background, summons up depth and further rearranges the Persian stacking composition in piled up patterns into a spatial organization of mixed order, not always homogeneous but in decidedly closer analogy with the mode of appearing of things in Nature (Figs. 11–12, 20). Combined with the optical frame, all these features unite somehow to produce the sensation that what one is seeing in the Mughal picture is an excerpt of the unfolding world, a tangible event of real life in which one is both an ocular witness and an invisible participant.

Finally, although the early Akbari imperial picture displays a Persian allure, in its leanings toward a univocal unambiguous semantic of forms and toward the projection of a certain logical empiricism in representation, it conceptually postulates and formally announces a new pictorial order under the sign of a sort of rationalism. Its plastic universe appears less governed by the imaginative constructions of the mind than by this empiricism through an imagery in which basic physics stages and frames poetics in variegated configurations more or less dialectical or hyperdialectical, yet consistently in favor of rational logic. Perceptually as glorious and luxurious as its Persian model, the Mughal picture exudes as much lyricism and flamboyance. Therefore, above all, the Akbari deconstruction of the Persian model must be considered a profound conceptual move; a move that underpinned critical aesthetic choices effecting the recontextualization of the Mughal picture in the mundane, posited as the framework and premises of the visual metaphysical projection that any act of painting necessarily engages.

One can then assert that with all its perceptual ebullience, surreal designs and poetic qualities derived from the Persian aesthetic, early Mughal painting nevertheless shows that “the intentional visual structure of the object’s ‘universe’” was more rational than idealistic.<sup>94</sup> All in all, the powerfully paradoxical combination of altered or processed Persian pictorial poetics with what I would call the “Mughal aesthetic positivism” constitutes one of the most creative forces of plastic hybridization in Akbari miniature. This will continue to be so for the art of Akbar’s successors.

## Notes

- 1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 94. In French, *Le visible et l’invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 129: “La mauvaise dialectique commence presque avec la dialectique, et il n’est de bonne dialectique que celle qui se critique elle-même et se dépasse comme énoncé séparé; il n’est de bonne dialectique que l’hyperdialectique.” See also Jacques Taminioux, “Merleau-Ponty. De la dialectique à l’hyperdialectique,” *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, Tome 41, 1 (1978): 34–55, reprinted in *Recoupements* (Bruxelles: Ousia, Essais philosophiques, 1982), 91–117, and “Merleau-Ponty: From Dialectic to Hyperdialectic,” *Research in Phenomenology* 10 (1980): 58–76.

- 2 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 95.
- 3 Or one may alternatively say, “constructively deconstructive.” The paradox here underscores the constructive aspect of the deconstruction in the sense that a construction positively results from the deconstructive process in question.
- 4 Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, pref. André Maurois (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 33.
- 5 This is an endeavor to be pursued in future research.
- 6 The late Modern and contemporary periods of the history of Persianate painting in general have been neglected and for a long time considered a separate field of study. Not until recently was it realized that art in these periods deserves as much attention as medieval and early Modern production. See Margaret S. Graves, “Feeling Uncomfortable in the Nineteenth Century,” in *Islamic Art Historiography*, <http://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/graves.pdf>.
- 7 Christiane Gruber, “Questioning the ‘Classical.’”
- 8 I situate my discussion beyond and outside the stylistic debates and disputes Christiane Gruber talks about in her article, which are essentially motivated by concerns about art historical order. My concern is aesthetic-critical; therefore, unlike Gruber, who wishes to integrate different stylistic modes into an all-inclusive historical discourse that would not set aside a particular trend or favor one over the other (and rightly so in the perspective of the history and archeology of the art), I do segregate the two fundamentally different phenomena of artistic experimentation and antiquarianism or any product of “neo-ism.” By no means does this distinction imply a quality judgment or evaluation. Both modes of expression have been practiced more or less continuously in the Persianate world. And both practices as well as the artistic vision they express are equally thoughtful choices corresponding to specific cultural needs and sensitivities. The point is that antiquarianism has to be read in light of new experiments, changes, and shifts in relation to legacy. These changes and shifts determine artistic evolution throughout time, while returns to tradition modulate and frame in a specific manner this dynamic of becoming by mitigating it with a concomitant dynamic of artistic retroactivism.
- 9 For me the illustrated copy of the *Shahnama* commissioned by this ruler represents one of the greatest achievements in Persian painting. See the recent reconstitution of all the pictures of this celebrated manuscript edited by Sheila R. Canby, *The Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp: The Persian Book of Kings* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2011). See also Francesca Leoni, “The Shahnama of Shah Tahmasp,” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), [www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shnm/hd\\_shnm.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shnm/hd_shnm.htm) (June 2008); and Stuart Cary Welsh, *A King’s Book of Kings: The Shah-nameh of Shah Tahmasp* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972).
- 10 It must be noted, however, that the subject of aesthetic hybridity in Persian painting, extremely different from that of Mughal miniature, has similarly been evidenced but not studied in a proper critical-aesthetic manner. The subject ought to inspire future research.
- 11 The terms “the Persian image” or “the Persian picture” echo David Roxburgh’s book title *The Persian Album*. He wrote, “By c. 1430, Baysunghur’s books had

set the standard and put painting on an irreversible course." In "Micrographia," 13. But I deliberately use the word "Persian" and not "Persianate" because of the unique ontological identity of the Persian image in relation to the Persianate productions outside Greater Iran. While the "Persian model" is the source of "Persianate painting" understood as a congregation of pictorial expressions spread throughout Islamic Asia and sharing common features, not all of them follow the same visual logic and project the same metaphysics. The differences between the variegated Persianate productions may even be more significant than their similarities.

- 12 For a survey of Persian literature, see Wheeler M. Thackston, *A Millennium of Classical Persian Poetry: A Guide to the Reading and Understanding of Persian Poetry from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century* (Bethesda, MD: Iranbooks, 1994). For thematic studies, see *Shahnamah Studies*, ed. Charles Melville (Cambridge: Center for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge, 2006), and *Shahnamah Studies II, The Reception of Firdausi's Shahnama*, ed. Charles Melville and Gabrielle van den Berg (Leiden: Brill, 2012); *Heroic Times, A Thousand Years of the Persian Book of Kings*, ed. Julia Gonella and Christoph Rauch (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2012); *Attar and the Persian Sufi Tradition: The Art of Spiritual Flight*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn and Christopher Shackleton (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006); and the classic work by Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956–59).
- 13 See Kumiko Yamamoto, *The Oral Background of Persian Epics: Storytelling and Poetry* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2003); *Islamic Art and Literature*, ed. Oleg Grabar and Cynthia Robinson (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2001); *Timurid Art and Culture: Iran and Central Asia in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Lisa Golombek and Maria Subtelny (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992); Mary Ellen Page, "Professional Storytelling in Iran: Transmission and Practice," *Iranian Studies* 12, 3–4 (1979): 195–215.
- 14 See Sussan Babaie, "The Sound of the Image/The Image of the Sound," in *Islamic Art and Literature*, ed. Oleg Grabar and Cynthia Robinson (Princeton: Markus Wiener, 2001), 143–62. And these recent references, *Shahnama: The Visual Language of the Persian Book of Kings*, ed. Robert Hillenbrand (Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004); *Persian Painting from the Mongols to the Qajars*, ed. Robert Hillenbrand (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000); David J. Roxburgh, *The Persian Album*, "The Study of Painting and the Arts of the Book," *Muqarnas* 17 (2000): 1–16, "Kamal al-Din Bihzad and Authorship in Persianate Painting," "The Aesthetics of Aggregation," "Persian Drawing, ca. 1400–1450: Materials and Creative Procedures," *Muqarnas* 19 (2002): 44–77, "The Pen of Depiction: Drawing in 15th- and 16th-Century Iran," in *Studies in Islamic and Later Indian Art from the Arthur M. Sackler Museum* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museums, 2002), 43–57; Marianna Shreve Simpson, *Sultan Ibrahim Mirza's Haft Awrang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Ebadollah Bahari, *Bihzad: Master of Persian Painting* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996). Finally, for a general account on the art of the book in Islam, see *The Islamic Manuscript Tradition: Ten Centuries of Book Arts in Indiana University Collections*, ed. Christiane Gruber (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
- 15 See, *Painting the Persian Book of Painting Today: Ancient Texts and Modern Images*, ed. Manfred Milz (London; Cambridge: Talking Tree Books, 2010).

- 16 Quoted in Aziz Esmail, *The Poetics of Religious Experience: The Islamic Context* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 13. Dr. Farhad Daftari (director of the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London) graciously gave me this book as a gift.
- 17 By virtue of the principled distinction (theoretically exposed in the previous chapter) between form and content from which derives this very divide between the image's aesthetic metaphysics and that of its discourse or subject matter, the poetic nature of the Persian pictoriality may be observable in illustrations of all sorts of topics; even scientific imagery may be aesthetically poetized.
- 18 Paul Ricoeur, "Writing and Iconicity," in *Interpretation Theory*, 42. See also in the abundant literature on scriptural and figural signifiers, Thomas W.J. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays On Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Roman Jakobson et al., *Verbal Art, Verbal Sign, Verbal Time* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), and Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).
- 19 Horace, *Ars Poetica: Epistle to The Pisos*, line 361. Simonides quoted in *The Princeton Handbook of Poetic Terms*, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 288; Hubert Damisch, "Ut pictura poesis," in *A Theory of /Cloud/, Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 26–32.
- 20 Poem quoted by Lillian Chang, "Poetry, Painting, and Calligraphy in Chinese Art," *China News*, December 5, 2013, <http://chinanews.bannedbook.org/201312/poetry-painting-and-calligraphy-in-chinese-art.html>. See also Oswald Siren, *The Chinese, on the Art of Painting* (New York: Schocken Books; Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1963), about Su Shi: 52–63, and about Wang Wei (Tzu Mo-ch'i): 30–35.
- 21 This is my translation of Guy Petitdemange commenting on Emmanuel Levinas, *La réalité et son ombre* (Paris: Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1999), in "L'art: ombre de l'être ou voix vers l'autre," *Revue d'esthétique, Esthétique et phenomenology* 36 (1999): 80. "L'imagination, organe de la sensibilité, ne va pas jusqu'à la chose, elle lui substitue son image."
- 22 These are Paul Ricoeur's expressions in reference to François Dagonet, *Ecriture et iconographie* (Paris: Vrin, 1973), in *Interpretation Theory*, 40 and 42.
- 23 Martin Jay quotes Robert Rivlin and Karen Gravelle, *Deciphering the Senses: The Expanding World of Human Perception* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 53, in *Downcast Eyes*, 8.
- 24 Henry Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis: Or The Imaginary and The Imaginal," trans. Ruth Horine, *Spring* (1972): 1–19.
- 25 As Galen A. Johnson remarks, "what we discover in Cézanne's new approach to painting is a faithful, observant, minutely ordered construction, a fusion of self and nature in which the visible world is re-constructed in its process of appearing to visual sensation as colored, solid, weighty, and monumental." In "Phenomenology and Painting: 'Cézanne's Doubt,'" *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, 11.
- 26 Then there also exists a highly abstract pictorial mode based on pure psychic activity with no reference whatsoever to the external world. This mode

characterizes the pictorial movement of “lyrical abstraction,” for example. But this model of artistic expression is of no hermeneutic use for Persian painting that is figurative.

- 27 See André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme*, 1924, and *Deuxième Manifeste du surréalisme*, 1930; in English, André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972); Mary Ann Caws, *Surrealism and the Literary Imagination: A Study of Breton and Bachelard* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1966).
- 28 The most illustrated works include the Persian epic of the *Shahnama* and canonical poetry like the *Haft Awrang* (*Seven Thrones*) by Abdul-Rahman Jami, *Gulistan* (*Rose Garden*) by Sa’adi, or *Khamsa* of Nizami. About the art of painting in the *Shahnama*, see this very useful recent resource: Marianna Shreve Simpson, “Shah-nama. iv. Illustrations,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, originally published April 2009, updated December 2013, [www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sah-nama-iv-illustrations](http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/sah-nama-iv-illustrations). This account includes an exhaustive bibliography. See also Ferdowsi’s *Shahnama: Millennial Perspectives*, ed. Olga M. Davidson and Marianna Shreve Simpson (Boston: ILEX Foundation; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).
- 29 Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, vol. II, 404.
- 30 Yet, this mode of conceptualizing pictorial representation by no mean excludes a more rational and direct apprehension of the world as well. While the Persian image is indeed essentially of poetic, linguistic, and imaginary-imaginal nature, it does integrate plenty of realistic imagery referring to the mundane. Both are not incompatible, but this is another question to reflect upon in a critical case study of Persian painting.
- 31 Jorge Luis Borges, “The Garden of Forking Paths,” in *Labyrinths*, 48.
- 32 Marianna Shreve Simpson and David Roxburgh have compared the art of Persian painting with comic books based on this art’s dependence on texts and the graphic aspect of the picturing mode. In particular, Simpson made an important observation about the pictographic qualities of the illustrations of fourteenth-century *Shahnama* manuscripts in *The Illustrations of an Epic: The Earliest Shahnama Manuscripts* (New York; London: Garland Publishers, 1979), 203–4; quoted by David Roxburgh in “Micrographia,” 17.
- 33 Martin Jay uses this term “chirographic” to describe a culture based on writing, in *Downcast Eyes*, 2.
- 34 Japanese illustrations of the famous Murasaki Shikibu’s *Tales of Genji*, Heian Japan (794–1185), offer another great example of sematographic pictoriality.
- 35 These are Jean-François Lyotard’s words from *Discourse, Figure*, quoted by Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes*, 564.
- 36 Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, 99, quoted by Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes*, 568.
- 37 In the rich literature on linguistics and lexicology, see these concise works by Howard Jackson, *Words and Their Meaning* (New York: Longman, 2005) and Georges Yule, *The Study of Language*, 4th ed. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

- 38 This is the main Persian mode of representing the human form in narrative depiction. But there also exist more individualized depictions and portraits as in the works of the Safavid painter Reza Abbasi, who distinguishes himself by his physiognomic portrayal of real people. Yet the underlying scheme of representation in this portraiture that is truer to nature remains anchored in this picturing mode I am analyzing and that I may therefore consider the aesthetic matrix of all these images of men and women. I already noted that human representation in the Persian context has not been studied in depth or systematically. For a look at Persian portraiture see, for example, Reza Abbasi's portrait of the poet and physician Hasan Chafa'i from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, illustrated in Francis Richard, *Splendeurs Persanes, Manuscrits du XIIIe au XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1997), 237.
- 39 See Chahryar Adle, "Recherche sur le Module et le Tracé Correcteur dans la Miniature Orientale, I," *Le Monde Iranien et l'Islam* 3 (1975): 81–105; and Ada Adamova, "Repetition of Compositions in Manuscripts," 65–75. One of the most interesting ideas in David Roxburgh's work on Persian aesthetics is the link he makes between those visual archetypes and literature: "The objective of the visual archetypes was to cut through or see past the appearance of the visible and to make a distillation of essential properties that would parallel heaven's hidden or veiled archetypes, just as writing does." in "Prefacing the Image," 199.
- 40 Gregory Minissale demonstrates with great precision the semantic function of the geometric order in Persianate painting, in *Images of Thoughts*, 51–83.
- 41 These depictions remain often enigmatic for the scholar. A much talked about but inconclusively interpreted example is Folio 44r representing "The bearded man drowning" from an illustrated manuscript of *Mantiq al-Tayr* (*The Conference of the Birds*) by 'Attar. See Chad Kia, "Is the Bearded Man Drowning? Picturing the Figurative in Late-Fifteenth-Century Painting from Heart," *Muqarnas* 23 (2006): 85–105; David Roxburgh, "Kamal Al-Din Bihzad and Authorship in Persianate Painting"; Ebadollah Bahari, *Bihzad: Master of Persian Painting*, 90.
- 42 Svetlana Alpers analyzes these gazing figures in Dutch painting in, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). Lady Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tales of Genji*, chapter VII, trans. Arthur Valey (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2000), 134.
- 43 Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*.
- 44 See my exploration of this aspect of language in "The Double Ontology of Islamic Calligraphy: A Word-Image on a Folio from the Museum of Raqqada (Tunisia)," 313–40. This article includes a philosophical bibliography on this subject.
- 45 Ibid. See my definition of the two distinct categories of figurative calligraphy: "figurative calligraphy of figural regime" as opposed to "figurative calligraphy of scriptural regime." The former has a primarily iconic function, while the latter remains within the sphere of scriptural forms. Of course, as always, those categories may lead to the construction of a third more ambiguous type of calligraphy oscillating between either one of the two regimes, thus engaging the process of dialectics.
- 46 On the aesthetic concept of space see, for example, James Elkins, *The Poetics of Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

- 47 Maurice Merleau-Ponty quoted by Galen A. Johnson, in "Phenomenology and Painting: 'Cezanne's Doubt,'" 12.
- 48 Of course this scriptural space is to be distinguished from the material plane of the writing medium itself.
- 49 On the *ma* concept, see Arata Isozaki, *Ma: Space-Time in Japan* (New York: Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, 1978).
- 50 The concepts of *phainesthai* (to give, the act of donation, to reveal, to unveil), *parousia* (to become present), and epiphany are key phenomenological notions. Martin Heidegger uses *phainesthai* to designate "that wherein something can become manifest, visible in itself." In *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford, UK, and Cambridge US: Blackwell, 1962), 51. Rudolf Bernet describes this process in this way, "l'apparaître de la chose sur fond d'invisibilité" (my translation: "the thing appearing on a background of invisibility"), in "Voir et être vu," *Revue d'esthétique, Esthétique et phénoménologie* 36, 99 (1999): 47.
- 51 "Thingness" refers to Martin Heidegger's famous concept set forward in the "Origin of the Work of Art," trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *Martin Heidegger: Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 17–87. See also *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 143–7. As for the metaphor "the degree zero," it has its source in the Husserlian phenomenological concept of the "zero point" of all perceptions located in the body (*Ideas II*). It has been reused by Maurice Merleau-Ponty to characterize the invisible as "the point or degree zero of visibility," in *Signes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 30, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McClearly (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), and in literary criticism by Roland Barthes in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1953), *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972). See also the critique of Merleau-Ponty's essays "The Visible and the Invisible" and "Eye and Mind," in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*.
- 52 Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, 158.
- 53 I add "in which we live" to characterize the physics inside the universe. For the recent scientific theories of the "universe in expansion" imply that there is something beyond it that is not space, a kind of non-space or nothingness against which the universe expands.
- 54 Of course the medium of writing can present itself in all sorts of patterns. It can be an image as well. In these cases, the scriptural plane is superimposed on another plane, iconic, decorative, or other.
- 55 Figurative decoration, effects of texture, and patterns may fill this non-imaged zone of the folio' bare plane, but they operate only at the level of the materiality or physicality of the page as the picture's medium that they emphasize or embellish. Owing to this duality between the physics of the medium and the physics of the image, these decorative motifs do not interfere with the aesthetic process described, which definitely constitutes an ipseitic element of the Persian picture.
- 56 See the book by the late origami master and theorist Masachiro Chatani, *Pop-Up Origamic Architecture* (Tokyo: Ondorisha Publishers, 1985).

- 57 The same tactile quality characterizes all the iconographic elements overflowing or stepping out the Persian pictures' borders.
- 58 David Roxburgh explores this theme in his own terms in "The Aesthetic of Aggregation: Persian Anthologies of Fifteenth Century" and in *The Persian Album* (particularly chapter 2).
- 59 Quoted from Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of Persia*, vol. II, 235.
- 60 Here "event" means that the representation is the event of pictorial language in the sense used by Paul Ricoeur in writing, "discourse is the event of language," in *Interpretation Theory*, 9.
- 61 Jacques Derrida's definition of the word "fragment" in Marie-Françoise Plissart and Jacques Derrida, "Right of Inspection" (*Droit de regard*), quoted by Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes*, 519–20.
- 62 Jane Austen describing visions of blossoming trees in spring in *Mansfield Park*, 465.
- 63 Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *Labyrinths*, 33.
- 64 Quotation of Gaston Bachelard in *L'air et les songes. Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1943), 20, quoted by Dario Gamboni, editorial, "Visual Ambiguity and Interpretation," *Res, Anthropology and Aesthetics* 41 (Spring 2002): 8.
- 65 Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in *Labyrinths*, 34.
- 66 On the aesthetic concept of epiphany, there is this dialogue between Stephen and Cranly before a clock in James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (New York: New Directions Press, 1959): "Yes, said Stephen. I will pass it time after time, allude to it, refer to it, catch a glimpse of it. It is only an item in the catalogue of Dublin's street furniture. Then all at once I see it and I know at once what it is: epiphany. What? Imagine my glimpses at that clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus. The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanized. It is just in this epiphany that I find the third, the supreme quality of beauty."
- 67 This is an expression of the philosopher Marx W. Wartofsky, "Picturing and Representing," in *Perception and Pictorial Representation*, ed. Calvine F. Nodine and Dennis F. Fisher (New York: Praeger, 1979), quoted by Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes*, 4.
- 68 "Style of seeing" is again borrowed from Marx W. Wartofsky and quoted by Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 4.
- 69 The process of Mughal detextualization of the Persian image can be compared to the detextualizing of the medieval picture that took place in the Renaissance in both Northern and Southern Europe, although by different aesthetic means and with different aesthetic results. See Harry Berger, *Situated Utterances*, 88–91, and Martin Jay's critique of detextualization in Western culture, in *Downcast Eyes*, 57–63.
- 70 John Berger quoted by Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 58.

- 71 The analysis that follows will sound familiar to the reader because the process I am currently describing in the Akbari context is in continuity with the process previously described in Sultanate context. However, “in continuity” does not mean “identical.” There is no redundancy, only parallels and echoes signaling a logical progression. Therefore, the reader should pay close attention to the details of the present exposé.
- 72 Here I repeat part of the title of Dario Gamboni’s editorial, “Visual Ambiguity and Interpretation,” 5–15. But the visual ambiguity that I specify as Persian and derived from poetics is to be distinguished from the dialectical ambiguity brought about the hyperdialectic plays in the Mughal aesthetic system. This should be clear throughout this discussion.
- 73 In addition to the article quoted above, see Dario Gamboni, *Potential Images* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002).
- 74 This is an aspect of Persian painting that has been well researched by the scholarship. See, for example, the meticulous examination of these crypto-patterns in Laura Parodi and Bruce Wannell, “The Earliest Datable Mughal Painting.”
- 75 Two clarifications must be made here. First, the term “irrational” is simply the opposite of “rational.” It does not imply any negative connotations such as madness. Second, it is important to recall the difference between this type of mysterious iconography and symbolism. Symbolism can be used for purposes of building a puzzle that is deliberately difficult to decode and for constructing a clearly legible symbolic idiom. Mughal painting contains many symbols, usually intended to be clear and direct as in Jahangir’s allegories.
- 76 Dario Gamboni in “Visual Ambiguity and Interpretation,” 8.
- 77 Laura Parodi unravels one of these hidden images in “Earliest Mughal Painting.”
- 78 The device of the optical window is examined in the next essay in this volume.
- 79 Robert Delaunay, *Du cubisme à l’art abstrait* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1957), 109.
- 80 Again, this pictorial convention does not exclude what we may call “rarer occurrences”—for example, a particularly textured blue color that indeed might be on the verge of picturing space. Those occurrences are slippages and do not change the norm, the mainstream, or the overall pictorial vision.
- 81 See Hubert Damisch’s discussion on the Renaissance theory of line and color in which he talks about the compromising effects of a too-visible linearity of the drawing on the painting’s iconic function. He writes, “But even if the *istoria* is woven with lines in this way, it will still be necessary, as has been said above, for those lines not to be too definite, for otherwise the image would appear to break up into a constellation of juxtaposed fragments [Persian painting].” in *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, 25–29, and 118 (quotation).
- 82 See the entry “Abu’l-Hassan,” in Johnathan M. Bloom, Sheila Blair, *The Grove Encyclopedia of Islamic Art and Architecture: Delhi to Mosque*, 7.
- 83 Whether it is this artist who included this feature or another painter is irrelevant to this analysis. Mughal pictorial works could be individual or collective, either by collaboration or through the act of repainting.

- 84 Here I borrow Gaston Bachelard's expression "operators of elevation" in his description of Shelley's poetic images that Hubert Damish quotes and appropriates to discuss the semiotics of the cloud iconography in Western painting, in *A Theory of /Cloud/*, 21.
- 85 Quote from the back cover of the English edition of Hubert Damish's *Théorie du /nuage/, A Theory of /Cloud/*.
- 86 I take issue with the term "occidentalization," as it implicitly draws some form of symmetry with the historical phenomenon "Orientalism," thus positing it as a counter-phenomenon. The circumstances as well as the content and results of the Mughal intersection with European art are a too complex a matter to be presented as a symmetrical binary process.
- 87 Gaston Bachelard explains "the verticality of the aerial imagination," in *Air and Dreams*, trans. Edith R. Farrell and Frederick Farrell (Dallas: Dallas Institute Publication, 1988), 111.
- 88 Hubert Damish, *A Theory of /Cloud/*, 79.
- 89 Ibid.
- 90 See Harry Berger, *Situated Utterances*, 88–91. Martin Jay also talks about the cognate but distinct process of "denarrativization," in *Downcast Eyes*, 47–81.
- 91 The thick and worked edges of Frank Stella's paintings offer a powerful example of this defining property of the frame in pictorial art underscoring the "object-like" nature of the medium.
- 92 Here I plainly allude to the eighteenth-century French literary form of the "roman à tiroirs," the compositional principle of which relies on a main story combined with other secondary independent narratives.
- 93 This is the title of chapter 4 in Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*.
- 94 Eugene Kaelin, "The Visibility of Things Seen: A Phenomenological View of Painting," in *An Invitation to Phenomenology: Studies in the Philosophy of Experience*, ed. James M. Edie (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965), 55.

### *Suite et Fin: From Unbridled Hybridization to Non-Hybridness*

Yes: this place, Sikri, was a fairyland to them, just as their England and Portugal, their Holland and France, were beyond her [Jodha, Akbar's imaginary queen] ability to comprehend. The world was not all one thing. "We are their dream," she had told the emperor. "And they are ours."

Salman Rushdie, *The Enchantress of Florence*

During the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir, Mughal pictorial hybridity remarkably expanded its registers with a frank, unrestricted, and playful appropriation of European art forms against the well-prepared backdrop of cross-pollination between late Timurid-Safavid imports and local Indo-Sultanate heritage. But if the history and archaeology of this new foreign artistic contribution has been rather well investigated, with much attention placed on the iconographic tracking and analysis of the adaptation of the Western repertoire in Mughal painting, the hermeneutic reading of this contribution as aesthetic fact remains in dire need of updating.<sup>1</sup> Above all, for a significant segment of the expert community, the role of the European element in the elaboration of the Mughal imagistic language has been wrongly based on the assumption that this European element was the main *cause* of this language's realistic tendency, instead of a *consequence* of the Mughals' rationalist philosophy of painting. Whether studies overemphasize or minimize the dimension of realism in this art, they generally overlook the crucial fact of Indo-Mughal imagistic conception as the origin of this development, a development that appears to have been already at work in the Akbari deconstruction of Persian art prior to any significant European artistic intake.

As previously argued, the fruitful relationship of Mughal painting with European art is primarily based on conceptual affinities or "natural sympathies," to use terms of literary criticism. This relationship thrived upon a fortuitous convergence that could be metaphorically described with Thomas Hardy's prose depicting a love scene: "All the while they were converging, under an irresistible law, as surely as two streams in one vale."<sup>2</sup> A parallel creative dynamic in early Modern Mughal India and Renaissance

Europe forged a pictorial practice steadily progressing toward a realistic approach to the human figure in all its forms: natural anatomic renderings, individualizations, expressions of emotions, and physiognomic portraitures. As elsewhere in this book, a look at the historiography provides a preparatory basis for the analysis of the key topic of human representation in Mughal art.

### Reading Through the Segmental History of Mughal Human Representation

The source and chronicling of realism in Mughal human representation are strong topics of opinion and debate.<sup>3</sup> But two art historians in particular, Kapila Vatsyayan and Laura Parodi, have taken two important directions of research to delve into yet another gray area in the history of Mughal painting.

In a 1987 issue of the journal *Marg*, “Mirror of Princes: The Mughals and the Medici,” Kapila Vatsyayan underscored a crucial pattern of Mughal aesthetic culture in situating Mughal portraiture against the background of the conflicting yet inseparable Indian aesthetic duality of the aniconic and iconoclastic tendency in Islam and the polytheistic visual landscape characterized by hyper-iconicity: “the development of portraiture in Mughal Indian painting has to be viewed against the tabooed figurative portraiture in a milieu of countless images of deities.”<sup>4</sup> This concise statement pinpoints the chief element of knowledge previously discussed to understand this art—namely, the powerful stimulus that the non-Islamic, body-focused Indian visuality offered to the Mughal eye and psyche. In addition to thus highlighting the Indianness of the Mughal concept of human representation coextensive to life, Vatsyayan inductively invalidated the faulty theory attributing it to European influence.

These ideas call for further commentary.

#### *IDOL ANXIETY SUBDUED*

The rise of physiognomic portraiture is one of the numerous facts of artistic culture in the Mughal Empire signaling that the stimulus of non-Islamic Indian visuality somehow subdued the Islamic pattern of “idol anxiety” in the subcontinent<sup>5</sup> (Figs. 2, 10, 13–14, 17, 35–6, 40). More precisely, it appears that through its impacting effects, this visuality overpowered the reserved attitude toward figuration characteristic of artistic culture in Islam, so that even the empire’s powerful traditionalist religious authorities could not prevent the profusion of mimetic images and visual expressions showcasing important people’s physical appearances.

Yet, fundamentally, this Islamic-Mughal change of attitude toward a frank artistic mimesis, waiving the risk of idolatry intrinsic to figuration, did not entail the Mughals’ disregarding their faith’s founding principles about the



36 *A Mughal Prince, Perhaps Danyal, Holding a Sprig of Flowers*, c. 1580–90, sixteenth century. Mughal India. Opaque watercolor with gold on paper. Cleveland Museum of Art, from the Catherine and Ralph Benkaim Collection 2013.293

immanent illusory character of the practice, the non-figurability of the unique God, and the absolute prohibition on Muslims to worship any false deity or visual forms apprehended as incarnations of the divine. This is made clear by Akbar's assertive argument about the licit-ness of making imitative images, reported by Abu'l-Fazl in *A'in-I Akbari*:

I cannot tolerate those who make the slightest criticism of this art [painting]. It seems to me that a painter is better than most in gaining knowledge of God. Each time he draws a living being he must draw each and every limb of it, but seeing that *he* cannot bring it to life must per force give thought to the miracle wrought by the creator and thus obtain a knowledge of him.<sup>6</sup>

The transgressions of these principles that did occur, such as the famous representation of Shah Jahan receiving rays of divine light from a cloud from which emerges an anthropomorphic rendering of God, did not engender a sustained trend, even less a norm (Fig. 14). Therefore, these transgressions did not really constitute a counterphenomenon in relation to the overall Mughal respect of these Islamic principles about illusionist human forms in art. In my opinion, this explicit Shahjahani representation, clearly derived from a Christian image, is an interesting instance that should be considered as a meaningful exception confirming the rule. Owing to its unorthodox character, this representation proves that for the Mughal patrons in early Modern India, the Islamic pattern of idol anxiety had yielded to a certain serenity and comfort vis-à-vis the production of life-like imagery that was premised on the conviction that such imagery did not pose a danger of spiritual corruption to Muslim viewers.

#### *FIRST KNOWN ATTEMPT AT PICTURING THE MUGHAL FAMILY*

Laura Parodi, the other expert of Mughal art mentioned above, proposes a different view on the topic of realism in Mughal human representation. Her ongoing research concerns Mughal portraiture during Humayun's sojourn in Kabul and consequently places the material in the particular perspective of its Persian background.<sup>7</sup> While her epistemic focus quickly eliminates European interference in the process of the Mughal adoption of plastic mimesis, Parodi presupposes that the latter results from a developmental course internal to the cultural domain of the Turkic-Mongol-Persian world. In a lecture delivered in London in 2010, "Tracing the Rise of Portraiture in the Timurid Aftermath: The Early Steps of the Mughal School under Humayun (r. 1530–56 CE)," she argued that in Kabul, "The works commissioned by Humayun would seem to display a greater interest in accurate likenesses than coeval Iranian or Central Asian paintings"<sup>8</sup> (Figs. 28–9). As she delves into an art that is in aesthetic essence Persian, the Indian cultural factor that Kapila Vatsyayan and other observers such as myself consider core to the formation of Mughal portraiture

does not have weight in her discussion.<sup>9</sup> As a result, Parodi's omission of the correlation with Indian visuality, although logically induced by the narrowed spatiotemporality she is dealing with, implies that the concept of likeness in Mughal painting is not a product of aesthetic hybridity and not the outcome of an encounter between the Persianate and the non-Islamic and Indic artistic forces in the broad Mughal geopolitical area. In sum, according to her reasoning, the Mughal portrait would be strictly a late Timurid invention, an intracultural Persianate phenomenon that initially took place outside the Indian cultural sphere.

By virtue of the different viewpoints they hold, Laura Parodi and Kapila Vatsyayan seem a priori to contradict each other. However, both scholars have disclosed valid and important elements of the puzzle, but due to academic specialization their reading of events is segmental and a fortiori incomplete. Putting together their disparate findings and filling in the blanks can help to form a more accurate picture of the historical-artistic unfolding that led the Mughals to adopt the strategy of realistic portraiture. This analytical proposal identifies many confluences and confluxes at the fount of this artistic development.

#### *THE SIGNALETIC VERSUS THE PHYSIOGNOMIC PORTRAIT*

First, it must be clarified that Vatsyayan and Parodi are not talking about the same thing, which explains the apparent discrepancy between their analyses. While the former refers specifically to Mughal physiognomic or faithful portraiture (*le portrait ressemblant*), the latter designates with the generic words "portrait" and "likeness" a different type of image made of representational signs such as dress, sartorial accessories, or emblematic attributes<sup>10</sup> (Figs. 2, 10, 30, 40). Unlike a morphological depiction that deals with physical appearances, the latter features operate on the indirect level of the symbol. They deliver semiotic and notional significance that allows identification of the represented individual while bypassing physiognomic recognition. Under this codified form, which I will call the "signaletic portrait," the figure's face and body remain archetypal.

The Kabuli production does not contain images that can be categorized as physiognomic renderings; therefore, in this regard they are not comparable to the Akbari likenesses indisputably belonging to this category. In the painting presumably depicting the celebration of Akbar's circumcision, Parodi has successfully uncovered the identity of the Mughal dynasty's members thanks to the semiotic decipherment of representational signs, and not by recognizing physiognomic traits<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 30). This piece and similar paintings from the Afghan region clearly fit the subcategory of the signaletic portrait. Consequently, what Parodi discerns through these "signs of greater individualization in Persianate painting" is not exactly what she thinks she

discerns—namely, the first known manifestation of the Mughal physiognomic portrait. Instead, she exposes a specific process of artistic manipulation one could call an “inflexion” of local Kabuli forms that bespeaks the Mughal patron’s interest in the representation of historic or living individuals, and more broadly in a documentary form of dynastic painting erected as a genre. The depiction of Akbar’s circumcision indeed not only represents real people, the Mughal princes, but also Kabul’s contemporary landscape, as Bruce Wannell’s thorough photographic investigation reveals in his landmark article coauthored with Laura Parodi, “The Earliest Datable Mughal Painting.” To be more precise, what Parodi’s study elucidates is not the early phase of Mughal faithful portraiture per se but a Mughal pattern of aesthetic consciousness characterized by a certain form of positivism.

In fact, if one puts together this Humayuni production and the subsequent Akbari portrait in the perspective of other early cultural products reflecting the same Mughal leanings toward recording reality, as with autobiography in literature (quite telling of the Mughal psyche), the distinctive positivist pattern one has detected through the Akbari deconstruction of the Persian pictorial aesthetic emerges even more clearly at the dawn of Mughal culture. Due to historical circumstances, this Mughal pattern has earned Kabul credit for the creation of a signaletic portrait genre and an imagery documenting the Mughal royal family’s life there. Yet, as in technical or aesthetic conceptual terms these Kabuli pictures belong to an imagistic type distinct from the realistic instances of Indo-Mughal portraiture and instead conform to the Persian-Kabuli conventions, the linkage between the two arts is on the order of meaning only. Both constitute a cultural signifier revelatory of the rationally inclined Mughal aesthetic vision, similarly to Mughal autobiographic writing. As far as the archaeology shows, the full materialization of this inclination of the Mughal mind toward life-like forms only occurred in Hindustan under Akbar’s patronage. This observation lays bare questions about the birth of the Mughal physiognomic portrait on the subcontinent.

### **From Thematizing the Body to Representing Its Reality**

If Sultanate book art technically ignored the portrait genre, in conferring a prominent semantic and phenomenological function upon the body in its iconography it did erect the metaphysical basis and framework necessary to the emergence of this genre in the Mughal period. This postulate prompts two questions. What elements enabled the transition from picturing the concept of the body in prototypical forms to describing its infinitely variegated reality? And how should one interpret and fit the Humayuni signaletic portrait within

this Indian history of the Mughal naturalistic portrait? Given the absence of evidence in the pre-exile period, any answer comes close to speculation. Nevertheless, some tenable ideas can be proposed.

To begin with the Kabuli production, there are two possible ways to explain Humayun's commission of the Mughal family portrait, based on the presupposition of its unusual character in relation to the local Persianate pictorial customs. The first option posits Humayun himself as the initiator of the concretization in visual forms of the Mughal pattern of thought that I have designated "aesthetic positivism," observed, for example, in literature since Babur's times. Having fathered images of Mughal self-representation, be they only signaleptic, Humayun would then qualify as the precursor of the Mughal portrait genre that developed in India following his repatriation. This interpretation thus situates in mid-sixteenth-century Kabul this determining process of the material translation into art of something that would have been heretofore an abstract, aesthetic philosophical leaning. As previously underlined, it also suggests that this leaning and the forms that convey it belong to and derive from the Turkic-Persian-Mongol world's cultural substratum.

The second possible explanation broadens the geo-historical perspective of the story by virtually integrating into it Babur and Humayun's cultural experience in India prior to the latter emperor's exile. Although impossible to verify archaeologically, this view takes into account the probability that an Indian precedent could have stimulated this phenomenon of signaleptic depiction of Mughal historical figures observable in Kabul. It thus implies that Humayun could have transferred to the Afghan region a cultural habit and artistic approach already forged in its main contours and applied in whatever manner in the pictorial practice during his and his father's lifetime on the subcontinent. Consequently, in Afghanistan the newness and originality of this Mughal emperor's artistic project and achievements could be explained by its foreignness—that is, its Indianness. And if to pursue his patronage activity in exile Humayun found himself forced by circumstance to use local means and labor, different from those he had at his disposal in his homeland, he did not have to change his vision and consciousness of art and sponsorship, forged in India—hence this specific process of the Mughal inflexion of Persian forms in the Kabuli images.

The difference between the second hypothesis and the first is that it posits Hindustan as the place where changes first occurred, where the directness of the gaze on reality that the *Baburnama* exhibits found a fertile ground to decisively imprint the Mughal visual arts. In agreement with my arguments heretofore, I subscribe to this second reading of events, which pointedly redirects the inquiry to the pre- and post-exile period of Mughal painting and re-problematizes Mughal human representation from the Indian perspective of the mutational evolution of the Sultanate archetypal bodies into Mughal physiognomic likenesses.

Back to the subcontinent, the latter phenomenon presupposes that at some point, impossible to pinpoint, the necessary conditions were united to create an opportunity for such an aesthetic mutation to occur. First, the specific intent of going beyond the symbolic must have been formed so as to provoke a shift of pictorial modalities from representing the human figure in signs to picturing it naturalistically. Second, some appropriate technicalities to support plastic naturalism must have been acquired and made available. Whether these conditions were present and attempts to make imitative depictions of historical individuals began in Mughal India before the Suri usurpation remains a mystery. It is nonetheless conceivable. Or alternatively, if the pictorial genre of likeness true to physical appearances even in minimal terms did not exist yet, an Indo-Mughal signaletic portrait conceptually comparable to the subsequent Kabuli example might have emerged. Either already naturalistic or symbolic-signaletic, this unknown early Indo-Mughal form of portraiture might well have served as a conceptual model to Humayun for his Afghan commissions. By the same token, these Humayuni commissions prove that Akbar did not invent the portrait genre in Mughal visual culture—as is widely assumed, with the exception of Laura Parodi—although he indeed might have been the first Mughal patron to intentionally promote or give the impulse to stylistic mimesis in the practice of portraiture.

It is my firm contention that the Akbari art of likeness results from conceptual and technical transformations that occurred in India before this monarch's advent, an evolutionary process at which the offbeat event of Humayun's patronage in Kabul hints. Accordingly, it is the aesthetic concept of the body in Sultanate miniature that I posit as the Mughal portrait's origin and background. Here is how I conjecture events unfolded.

*THE MUGHAL DYNASTY'S DESIRE TO BE CONCRETELY SEEN IN THE PICTURE*

In Sultanate painting, those riveting bodies, faces, and eyes belong to two distinct categories of typified human figures: the prominent group of mythological, legendary, and religious beings including gods, saints, and heroes, and the whole of humanity, crowds of men, and prototypes of simple mortals identifiable by social status and function such as princesses, maids, musicians, dancers, and so on. Overall, this Indo-Persianate imagery thematizes an imbalance and hierarchical relationship of interaction and confrontation of diverse natures between the powerful and the weak, the superior and the inferior, or the strong and the vulnerable, characteristic of the world of poetics, myth, and religion in general. In Sultanate painting, this elevated and typified presentation of existence processed through moving poetic stories, sacred histories, and exemplary myths is given the tangible, rational, approachable, and familiar face of a recognizable carnal reality through what I call "the figure of the body" (Figs. 15–16, 25–6). In thus systematizing the figurability

of abstract existential concepts such as elevation, righteousness, truth, and power, the Sultanate picturing mode made a spectacular demonstration of the semantic and aesthetic efficiency of the strategy. Let us recall that, in this respect, Sultanate book art only reflects traits of Indian visuality informed by the Indic cultural matrix.

It is precisely on this basis of a validated and persuasive philosophy of visuality and figurality of the body that I think the first Mughal rulers found the motivation to themselves appear in the picture, body and face visible or recognizable in a stylistic manner or another, just like the heroes and deities of Indic, Persian, Arab, or other origin. Under the spell of cultural immersion, specifically the adaptive behavior and psychological mimetism it induces, the new dynasts inserted themselves into this Indian pluralistic pantheon of heroes and heroines, supra-human beings, and divine entities that traditionally peopled the Sultanates' illustrated manuscripts; a pantheon that already included the original Mughal heroic alter-egos by projection, the familiar kings of the *Shahnama* that enabled the institution of "event portraits."<sup>12</sup> In short, the Mughals became themselves the new heroes in Indian book art. Neither gods nor even semi-gods as is sometimes said, they placed themselves at the top of the hierarchy of exceptional beings as men closer to the almighty God of Islam—"God's shadow on earth," following the Persian conception of kingship or even the possessors of divine light, according to Abu'l-Fazl's vision of Akbar; a vision poetically described by the chronicler's brother Faizi.<sup>13</sup>

The new heroes, the Mughal monarchs, were living beings of flesh and blood with their own stories to tell and their own prowess to showcase in painting, mainly real-life facts and history. Consequently, there is a tight correlation between this anchorage of Mughal illustrated narratives in reality and history, and their protagonists' innovative mode of appearing in the images in the form of naturalistic portraits. However, this obvious correlation does not suffice to explain the abandoning of the indirect symbolic depiction of the human figure in favor of a more direct pictorial description. The Humayuni artifacts from Kabul show well that idealistic forms also have the capacity to present recognizable historic beings. This means, inductively, that a factor other than just an intention-founded programmatic logic was necessary to call forth such an aesthetic gesture. Naturally, this factor concerns the intrinsic laws of pictorial practice and the decisive events they tend to provoke.

The hermeneutics of Akbari painting solidly backs up the archeologically established status quo, which situates the emergence of a full-fledged imitative portrait under Akbar's patronage (as opposed to the signaletic formula) (Fig. 10). Objective data present Akbar and his painters as active promoters of the concept of physiognomic likeness, as the images show an obvious desire and effort to surpass the signaletic portrait by obtaining naturalism as much as possible (Figs. 6, 35–6). The artists worked at capturing the emperor's basic

facial traits so as to be able to picture him faithfully in all illustrations that involved him.<sup>14</sup> But while in some paintings and drawings the individualized rendering of the imperial figure is sufficiently perceptible to signal some level of veracity, in others the work remains visibly at the state of an experiment that does not yet succeed in abandoning the archetypal traits of a Turk-Mongol man.

These variable oscillations between mimetic and modular portrayals betray the infancy of the art of physiognomic likeness. At the same time they reveal a firm aesthetic choice and determination to change picturing modalities to achieve true plastic realism. Also telling of this new Mughal aesthetic philosophy of human representation is Akbar's commission of the portrait of the court's grandees, mentioned in period texts, which set a long-lasting trend of Mughal aristocratic portraiture.<sup>15</sup>

#### PORTRAIT AS ANOTHER INSTRUMENT OF AKBARI PICTORIAL RATIONALIZATION

Those experiments make solid sense when contextually examined in relation to the general aesthetic direction of Akbari image construction. The concept of the truthful portrait fully participates in the deconstructive strategy of rationalization and detextualization of the late Timurid-Safavid pictorial models introduced at the Mughal court in 1555. As with the process of frame redesigning and the introduction of iconic space in the image, Akbari portraiture is underpinned by the positivist logic that redefined pictorial metaphysics in early Mughal India. In addition, one must keep in mind that the Humayuni-Akbari *tasvir khana* (atelier specialized in painting attached to the *kitabkhana*) in India benefited from a unique combination of human resources. The original technical and stylistic intersection created by the teaming of Persian masters with local artists trained in variegated century-old pictorial traditions, provided the optimal circumstances for engaging in a technically more sophisticated form of portraiture. Although this statement seems evident, the specific terms of this intersection have not been properly probed, and have been obscured by a particular current among the studies' extreme tendencies, one that overemphasizes the Persian factor in the formation of the so-called Mughal style or school.

Still to be sorted out is the exact contribution of each tradition to the picture's different constitutive levels: conceptual, structural, stylistic, and iconographic. For not only has the conceptual model of Sultanate body-centric imagery escaped experts' attention, but the impact of post-exile re-Persianization of forms on the Mughal portrait's elaboration has yet to be clarified. While I have sufficiently argued about the Sultanate model, the latter point compels further reflection as a substantial segment of the scholarly community thinks that Mughal imperial portraiture constitutes a novelty in contradistinction with Persianate pictorial lore.

PERSIAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE RISE  
OF THE MUGHAL PHYSIOGNOMIC  
PORTRAIT

No one would deny that on technical grounds the post-exile Persianate imports brought about a new level of refinement and virtuosity in Indian painting. In the *tasvir khana*, Persian masters taught an array of fresh pictorial strategies such as the use of fine delineations for minute detailing, new textures, and palette manipulations that enriched the Indian color spectrum and savoir-faire in painterly effects. Even though kingly portraiture true to physical appearances did not exist in Greater Iran until Shah 'Abbas' reign (1588–1629), it is impossible not to correlate this Persian technical contribution to these early Mughal experiments with imitative human figuration. All the more so because Safavid painting from Shah Tahmasp's era demonstrates interest and skill in expressing the body and facial particulars of people generally, although not of the ruler specifically. The paintings often display standard modular and more naturalistic individualized figures within one and the same image (Figs. 28–9).

This aspect, typical of early Safavid painting, underscores two important factors that support the discussion about Indo-Persian creative synergy at the inception of the Mughal portrait. The first factor is that the naturalistic portrayal of the human subject had already been integrated in the Safavid pictorial habits of this period. The practice has a history in the Iranic cultural area. Individualization was used, for instance, in the fifteenth-century colored drawings called "Black Pens" in which enigmatic protagonists, often described as caricatures, reveal an acute observational attitude to the human form. However, if these Persian figurations constitute a mimetic iconographic component of the Persian picture, by no means do they indicate



37 *The Feast of Sada*, attributed to Sultan Muhammad (active in the early sixteenth century), c. 1525. Folio 22v from the *Shahnama* (*Book of Kings*) of Shah Tahmasp. Tabriz, Iran. Opaque watercolor, ink, silver, and gold on paper. © 2000–2014 Metropolitan Museum of Art. All rights reserved

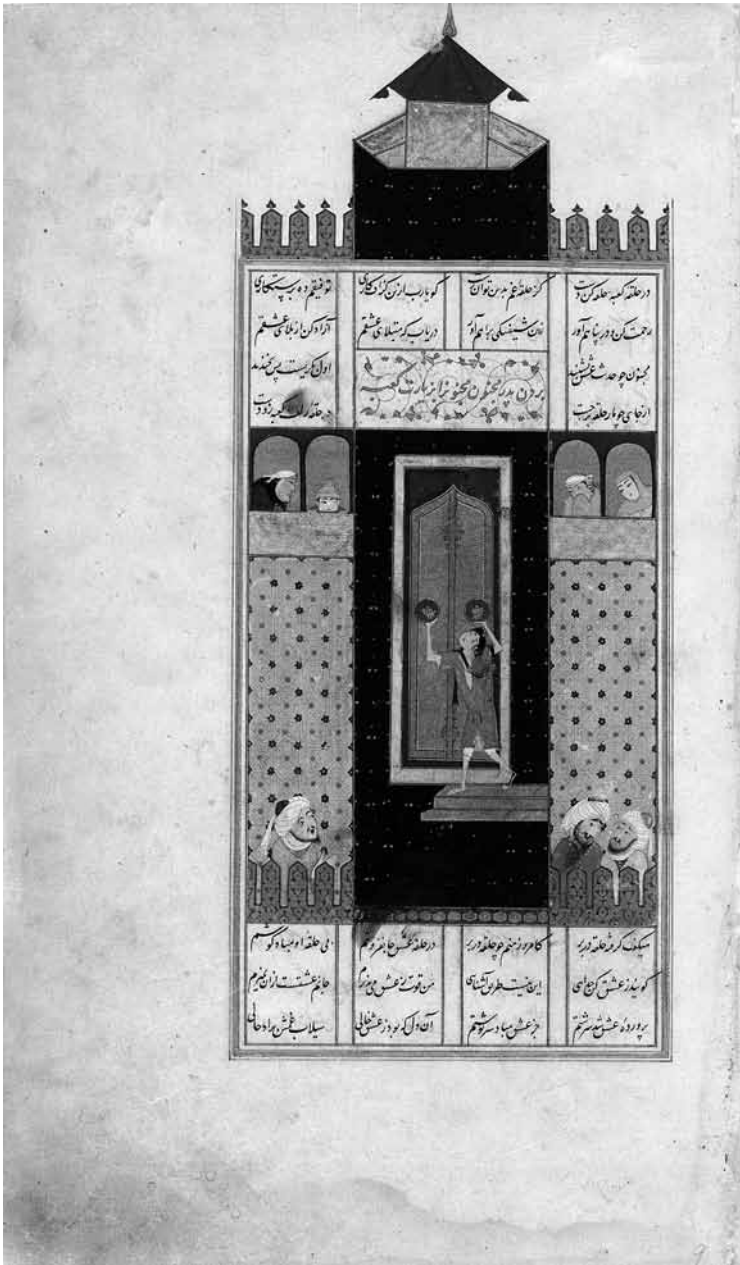
an imitative conception of it. Significantly, although early Safavid painting suggests some fondness for the naturalistic mode of picturing figures, at the same time it provides the most surrealist and deconstructivist imagery ever crafted in Persian art. With their dissolved frames and hyperdialectic plays of abstraction and figuration among other fantastical visual effects, the Safavid transhuman visionary tableaux of this period defy rational definition of pictorial metaphysics and unsettle certitude regarding the real and the imaginary.

The second important factor relies on the first. As with their Persianate predecessors, the first Safavid dynasts (until Shah 'Abbas) were uninterested in exposing their own physical traits in painting, even though the technical means were available. Evidently, the selective application of those means to the representation of anonymous, non-historical men and women was a conscious gesture. But what were the premises of this aesthetic selection?

In my critique of Shah 'Abbas' likeness, I pointed out the existence of a self-representational mode by proxy and ruled out the hypothesis of the rejection of the pictorial portrait genre by this ruler's predecessors for religious-political reasons. In so doing I have shown that probing the art's aesthetic logic is the surest path to illuminate the elusive Persian politics of human figuration. To continue in this vein, the Safavid selective strategy concerning the king's image might be explained if one considers the poetic-linguistic nature of the Persian image and its corollary, the overall Persian conception of pictorial representation in distancing with the mundane—even though this conceptual distancing did not prevent the controlled inclusion of plastic realism. My explanation rests upon the following reasoning.

According to the laws of pictoriality, the exposure of historic individuals as in Akbari portraiture or the focus on the figure of the body as in Sultanate miniature effects a projection of reality (through the reality of the individual or that of the body) potentially powerful enough to turn the image's metaphysics into a mirror of existence or to construct a pictorial order bestowing on *mimesis* the supremacy over *poesis*. This is due to the aesthetic fact that the human face and body, when given a dimensional phenomenal presence in the picture, have the formidable capacity of either reducing or eliminating this distance, this stretch that the internalizing poetic gaze on the world erects between art and nature. The Safavid imagistic language being precisely the outcome of such distancing operations, it seems logical then that this language made a highly segregative use of the imitative depiction of the human subject, especially if one considers that the state's leader, God's shadow on earth, was the center of existential reality and as such had himself total power to shape the image's metaphysics through either his appearance or absence in the image.

In other words, owing to huge differences of semiotic faculty and meaning, some physiognomic portraits could be inserted in the Safavid picture and



38 *Majnun at the Ka'aba*, page from a Manuscript of the *Khamsa* (Quintet) of Nizami. Shiraz, Iran. 1517/924 A.H. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. Nasli M. Heeramaneck Collection, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

others not, until the Safavid picture began to open itself up to external aesthetic modes in the seventeenth century, including foreign mimetic pictorialities from Mughal India and Europe.

*THE HYPER SEMIOTIC-SEMANTIC ACT OF THE MUGHAL EMPEROR'S APPEARING IN IMAGE*

It is now easier to dissipate uncertainty about the *raison d'être* of the Mughal portrait's economy and be more assertive about the circumstances of its blossoming. Unlike the first Safavid rulers, their Mughal contemporaries saw fit to implement the advanced Persian craftsmanship they had at their disposal for the purpose of direct, undisguised, verisimilar self-representation. Aiming *a contrario* to reduce the stretch between art and nature on which Persian pictoriality was built, the Mughals made full use of the imitative depiction of the human subject by including the hyper-powerful semantic-semiotic imperial portrait among the scenes' other protagonists, also depicted with as much truthfulness as possible. More accurately, the Mughal patrons and artists reaped from the highly stimulating factorial conjunction of their own positivist spirit underpinning the integration of the Sultanate-Indic key concept of the body-mirror of the world, with the availability after 1555 of a rich hybrid spectrum of pictorial techniques and strategies highly suitable for the practice of figural individualization. It appears consequently that it was this momentous post-exile development, marked by the rationalization and detexualization of the picture, that launched the Mughal art of faithful portraiture.

This art genre thrived during the three generations of Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan. Each of these emperors helped refine the practice according to personalized politics of human representation during their reigns. The stream of European artistic forms at the Mughal court that presented advanced techniques of pictorial realism, played an important part in this unfolding.

**The Akbari Portrait: A Plainly Human Image for a Suprahuman Emperor**

As with European portraiture, the Indo-Mughal portrait developed in different exploratory phases that correspond to the different uses and users of the genre as well as to its technical progression. While the constant is physical truthfulness, there were three sharply defined phases as Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan assigned a different function to the concept of likeness and, importantly, as the presence of European art became more significant in the last decades of the sixteenth century. Three types of imperial portrait were thus created. To the plainly human and naturalistic Akbari image, Jahangir added the mythologizing self-portrait by proxy, as

one might put it, upon which Shah Jahan invented another self-aggrandizing imagistic product, the imperial icon. This threefold representation of the Mughal monarch forms the center of an expansive and no less elaborate peripheral portraiture comprising portraits of other people of various social importance: court members, courtiers, pluralistic religious personalities, scholars, sages, artists, and so on, and, finally, crowds of anonymous commoners. A meaningful interrelationship between the center and periphery structures the Mughal portrait such that the emperor's likeness can be understood only against or in relation to the image of others, be they powerful or less so.

Akbar's reign marks the laying of the aesthetic foundation for the imperial portrait as a physiognomy-based image. Indeed, the hermeneutics of Mughal paintings shows that, in this early period, this art was mainly concerned with constructing the proper framework for the practice itself and did not do more than fulfill its basic task—namely, naturalistically painting the emperor's body and face. This state of affairs appears all the more clear in that the Akbari portrait contrasts with presentations of this ruler in period texts as well as with subsequent Jahangiri portraiture; a fact that supports exhortations to study the artistic practice's logic in an artwork (Figs. 3, 6, 10, 13–14, 17, 35–6, 40).

In the period sources, Abu'l-Fazl famously applied to Akbar's persona the Persian theory of "divine light" that, relying on explicit graphic imagery, could have inspired the creation of a glorious ostentatious analogous depiction in pictorial forms. Following is a well-known excerpt of this theory from *Ain-I Akbari*:

Royalty is a light emanating from God, and a ray from the sun, the illuminator of the universe, the argument of the book of perfection, the receptacle of all virtues. Modern language calls this light the divine light, and the tongue of antiquity called it the sublime halo. It is communicated by God to kings without the intermediate assistance of anyone, and men, in the presence of it, bend the forehead of praise toward the ground of submission.<sup>16</sup>

While this descriptive text brings to mind the solar portraits of Jahangir and Shah Jahan, it does not have an equivalent in the imperial pictorial likenesses produced under Akbar, who was the subject that inspired it. This textual picture of the Mughal monarch even turns out to be in an awkward position in relation to Akbari imperial portraiture. The latter not only manifests no intention of aesthetic self-aggrandizement by means of supra-natural visual attributes as in the portraits of Akbar's successors, but on the contrary Akbari portraiture exudes modesty and simple humanity (Figs. 10–13). Paintings and drawings depict Akbar as the human being he was, without artifice or affectation, in a variety of postures, situations, and states. Altogether, representations of Akbar made under his rule constitute a quasi-objective documentary of the man and his life, as if he had been followed by a cameraman or a photographer, aware

of being under scrutiny, but purposely ignoring this and humbly continuing to attend to business.<sup>17</sup> Focused on reporting and recording, the portraits posit the viewer as a witness or looker who is tacitly but not actively acknowledged with connective devices such as frontal presentation or an exchange of glance. Neutral and natural, Akbar's portraiture lets the lyrical depictions of his actions and deeds speak of the king's glory.

It could be argued that the emperor wished to be portrayed under these non-ostentatious aspects to deliver a kind of humanist self-image. But this idea has no solid basis. The texts and historical data suggest instead that Akbar was no different than other monarchs concerning self-perception and sensitivity to ostentation. Prone to developing a cult of personality dedicated to him, Akbar's sense of humility and modesty seems to have manifested itself only in the intimate sphere of spiritual sentiments.<sup>18</sup> As a general rule in early Mughal painting, the visualization of such sentiments appears reserved for a thematic imagery of piety that could purposely feature a humble appearance of the emperor, as, for example, in the pair of drawings of Akbar in prayer, facing his son Jahangir in the same position, made after his death under the latter's patronage in the seventeenth century (Fig. 40). But there is no indication that Akbar had any intention or conscious desire to extend this unassuming mode of presentation to all occasions of his portraiture in order to create a typified self-portrait that would label him "the modest emperor." This character of plainness can only be explained by the early development of portraiture practice in the Akbari period.

#### *NEWNESS OF THE PHYSIOGNOMIC LIKENESS*

On the technical plane, Akbari likenesses look rough in comparison with Jahangiri and Shahjahani portraits, a perceptual quality that logically situates them at the bottom of a curve of artistic maturation reaching heights of refinement during the reign of Shah Jahan (Figs. 13–14). This obvious point however does not say much about the odd discrepancy between this plastic conception of the imperial figure and the rhetoric of grandeur and exception that developed toward anything in culture that had to do with Akbar's persona during his lifetime. More significant is that, owing to the lack of familiarity with faithfully portraying real people in this early period despite the support of Persian technique, all artistic efforts were channeled toward one goal, achieving maximum authenticity and veracity in the naturalistic rendering of human appearances. That the main subject of Akbari portraiture, the imperial figure, did not receive different treatment than other physiognomic images proves this was the goal.

Preoccupied with this sole task of implementing and mastering plastic realism, painters indiscriminately applied the same politics of representation to the sovereign as to other individuals pictured, regardless of rank. A

differential *semiosis* to mark out the princely portrait with a particular setting, presentational mode, or positioning of the body, face, and gaze was not yet established. In paintings and drawings commissioned during his reign, Akbar is indifferently represented from many angles. No restrictions or enhancements alter the plainness and directness of these depictions. Consequently, for each work it was not a preconceived conception of the imperial image but rather a narrative or the imperatives of a particular situation that commanded the choice of presentation for the monarch's body and face—three-quarter view or profile, and wide-open or downcast eyes as in the drawing *pris sur le vif* attributed to Govardhan (1600–1605) (Fig. 10).

This is how the Mughal art of physiognomic portraiture appears to have been formed in *theoria* and *praxis*, through an indiscriminate attention to the natural traits of Akbar, the man, as to those of any other human being. And if one gives more thought to this state of affairs one could also suggest that, due to its revelatory character and newness, this unprecedented act of displaying the sovereign's recognizable bodily appearance in images was already *per se* a first bold gesture of ostentation. On this aspect of imperial presentation, similarly to the Safavid view, in the Mughal context, exposing the king clearly did not convey the same significance and resonance as exposing any lesser individual. One consequently ought to imagine that the differential relationship between the imperial and the ordinary portrait was perceived as natural, immanent, so that contemporary viewers would automatically attribute different significance to the phenomenology of the emperor's appearance than to the phenomenology of the rest of humanity. One could say these viewers would themselves do the work of semiotic differentiation, which formally did not exist yet in Akbari portraiture.

This is also how one should reconstitute in imagination the likenesses of members of the court commissioned by Akbar that have disappeared. These now missing portraits most likely did not form an imagery systematized according to pre-determined pictorial norms attached to the noble portrait genre but instead, like the imperial portrait itself, composed an empirical collection of variegated images capturing each subject in a state, action or posture deemed the most eloquent in relation to each picture's imagistic context. Most likely the artist or the sitter or both had to decide individually about the figure's presentational mode in a creative process of improvisation and deliberation.

The representation of an actual event, such as "the arrest of Shah Abu'l Ma'ali by the dependable Tolaq Khan Quchi" (1556–60) ascribed to Abu'l-Samad, illustrates these suspected modalities of portraiture. In this picture two historical individuals are shown caught in a dramatic action, but they are differentiated through a different plastic renditions of their physical aspects.<sup>19</sup> Whereas the Shah presents the standard Central-Asian-Persian face of an expressionless and ageless male figure, the naturalistic portrait of Quchi

reveals a mature and experienced man. The latter thus forms the image's centerpiece. By conferring upon the scene a great sense of realism, this highly individualized, expressive portrait highlights the actual event depicted. Conversely, this highlighting process bestows on the figure of the dependable an authoritative dimension as an actor involved in a historic event.

Coexisting with this portrait of action, if one may say, there existed the imagistic prototype of the isolated figure, portrayed in stillness against a more or less neutral background (Figs. 35–6). This model flourished in the Jahangiri and Shahjahani eras. A rare Akbari specimen, in a painting within a painting by Fattahi Nishapuri (1570–75), hints at the same improvised yet focused imagistic strategy just described.<sup>20</sup> This work titled after the text it illustrates, "Heart Is shown Beauty's Portrait," represents an allegory from a fifteenth-century Persian romance. The portrait of the allegorical figure of Heart, held by the personification of Vision, consists of an imitation of a lifelike male figure seen in three-quarter view and standing on a plain, dark field, with one raised arm that points to Beauty, the image's addressee inside the bigger picture. The portrait's conceptualization is clear. Rather than posing in a prearranged posture as in numerous Jahangiri and Shahjahani likenesses of *grandees*, the figure presents the naturalistic allure of an individual calling out to another with body language. The realism of the portrait as an illusionist presence of the absent has been the privileged idea in this artifact, as in other portraits from the Akbari period.

#### *THE ROLE OF EUROPEAN ART IN THE MUGHAL PORTRAIT'S FORMAL CONSTRUCTION*

If the influx of European art had nothing to do with the genesis and conceptualization of the Mughal portrait, it cannot be denied that this influx enriched Mughal art at different levels—first, by offering a non-negligible technical complement. Here I refute the various belittling presentations of this phenomenon that sprinkle the historiography or that can be heard in academic lectures. The wording used in these presentations such as "exotica," "recycling," or "playful or purely aesthetic use" in the reductive sense of superficial manipulation, implies a light, almost contemptuous Mughal attitude toward European culture. It wrongly suggests that the Mughals were seduced yet had a shallow comprehension and moderate interest in the artistic material from Europe. For example, Amina Okada said "that the emperor was immediately seduced by these exotic fruits from the West," and Akbar's artists "were attracted by the exoticism and novelty of the themes handled, even though the religious content held no meaning for them."<sup>21</sup> The reductionist latter point about the Christian iconography will be pondered in due time.

One is certainly dealing with a much more implicative cultural contact-event in which the sensitive appreciation of those Western elements constituted a key factor. The Mughals had a clear awareness that European paintings and

prints, linked with book illustrations as in Mughal miniature, provided them with valuable material to work with and draw from but not because they were lacking skill or needed a muse or were even bewitched by its exotic beauty, rather because this material was so relevant to them. European art conveyed an approach to forms, particularly the human form, that was in osmosis with their own pictorial metaphysics. This fortuitous osmosis encouraged the Mughals to set about an intense activity of what could be serenely called “apprenticeship” by means of which they acquired knowledge of European illusionism (Figs. 7–9). Apart from the iconographic and semiotic intake, the particular texture of the figures’ face and anatomy visibly refined in the late sixteenth–early seventeenth centuries, the skillful manner of suggesting the volume and vibrant presence of the body underneath the clothing’s fabric, and other Mughal pictorial technical skills owe substantially to this acquisition. Therefore, at a first level of hermeneutic reading, the Mughal imitations and adaptations of the Western repertoire, both secular and religious, are to be viewed as a committed artistic exploration that included these famous meticulous Mughal studies of European plastic realism.

Finally, owing to the inspirational circumstance of creative interplay between the founding Indo-Persianate substratum and the artistic stream from Europe, naturalism in Mughal portraiture steadily progressed until the end of Shah Jahan’s rule. However, once past the primary phase of conceptual foundation, a second phase ensued characterized by a more elaborate semantic-semiotic manipulation of the portrait’s forms. This second phase spans the reigns of Jahangir and Shahjahan, which saw the canonization of the profiled likeness and the semantization of the imperial image through mythologized and iconified representations. Also, noticeably, with these developments emerged the animal portrait genre, profiled and portrayed with techniques and conventions analogous to those employed for picturing individuals of social importance, except of course for the imperial attributes.<sup>22</sup>

### Canonization of the Profile View in Jahangiri Portraiture

While the plainly human Akbari conception of the imperial image remains in fashion in Jahangiri painting, in parallel new representational modalities attest to a program of regulation and semantization of the physiognomic portrait in order to turn it into a discursive language and instrument of a more complicated visual rhetoric.<sup>23</sup> The systematization of the profiled physiognomic likeness stands out among these innovations to the extent that one can talk about “an aesthetic canonization” of this format<sup>24</sup> (Figs. 3, 13–14, 17, 40). The term “canonization” precisely signifies that far from resulting from a pathological pattern of “rigid attachment,” as has been written, the Mughals’ marked preference for the side posture rests upon articulated aesthetic philosophical choices.<sup>25</sup> As in the Roman medal portrait, early



39 *Squirrels in a Plane Tree, with a Hunter Attempting to Climb the Tree*, by Abu'l-Hasan, from the *Johnson Album*, 1605–1608. Mughal India. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. © British Library Board

Renaissance profiled portraiture, or the art of Ancient Egypt, the side view in Mughal representation constituted a meaning-producing device to be probed.

In the scholarship, the Mughal's profiled figuration has been mostly tied to socio-political practices of princely ceremonial and etiquette underpinned by principles of authority and hierarchy.<sup>26</sup> These principles commanded a ritualistic distance between the emperor and those who had the privilege of seeing him, which the profile view perfectly translates in painting, because it avoids direct contact with the beholder's gaze. Indeed, the rhetoric of distance associated with the expression of power appears to be at work in such Mughal political imagery as the famous group portrait showing Jahangir sitting on an hourglass throne.<sup>27</sup> However, it would be a mistake to think that social etiquette is the direct cause and main justification of the canonization of the profile view in Jahangiri painting. For if the courtly protocol found in this representational mode an adequate tool of visual expression, above all the Mughal profiled likeness reflects a specific aesthetic apprehension of the metaphysical themes of man, the body, and the individual in the imagistic space, just as in fifteenth-century Europe or Ancient Egypt. Let us recall some data to support this preliminary observation.



40 *Drawing of Emperor Jahangir (r.1605–1627) Holding a White Jade Cup, possibly by Manohar (active c. 1582–c. 1625) or Abu'l-Hasan (active 1600–c. 1635). Ink and opaque watercolor on paper. Los Angeles County Museum of Art*

#### *SOME FACTS ABOUT THE MUGHAL PROFILED LIKENESS*

First, the profile view in Mughal portraiture—clearly originating from the Indic pictorial repertoire in the pre-Mughal Sultanate context in which nothing indicates that it conveyed political or social significance—was never exclusively restricted to the grandees' portraiture. It was always also applied

to the representation of people of low social rank—for instance, the Mughal court’s domestic staff or artists (Figs. 6, 8, 11–13).

Second, it is not the profile per se that differentiates Mughal dynastic and aristocratic likenesses from those of ordinary men and women but rather the way the profile is configured and combined with other enhancing plastic formulas and visual markers. The latter include the isolation of a selected figure in a single folio posing still and standing out against an abyssal color field, the subtle yet noticeable enlargement of the head’s proportions and detailing of facial features, and the array of emblematic motifs and kingship paraphernalia such as halos, angels, crowns, globes, and so on—amply commented on in previous studies.

Third, significantly, the systematization of the profile view did not occur under Akbar’s rule despite that in this period Mughal princely etiquette was already quite sophisticated. The reasons for this discrepancy are the same as for the interval between the emergence of the rhetoric of light in writing and its visualization in the imperial portrait. This interval corresponds to the period of time that is often necessary to shift from the innovative and constructive-but-unprepared phase of laying out an art’s foundation, here physiognomic depiction, to the phase of devising, which sees a deepening of aesthetic values and a developing of preferences and more specific plastic orientations and manipulations. What are then the conceptual underpinnings of this act of turning the profile pattern into a highly qualitative form defined with the precise contours of an elaborate *semiosis*?

*THE HERMENEUTIC MODEL OF THE PORTRAIT OF A MAN WITH A MEDAL OF COSIMO THE ELDER BY BOTTICELLI*

One way to approach this complex issue is to use as an analytical tool a well-known pictorial model that exposes and apprehends the aesthetic dilemma of the profile versus the full or three-quarter face in portraiture. Sandro Botticelli’s *Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo the Elder* offers an ideal model (Fig. 41). It eloquently thematizes this dilemma through the dualistic composition of a youth gazing into the viewer’s eyes, while emphatically displaying the golden profile of the Medici patriarch.

In this picture, under the cover of glorifying this Florentine family, Botticelli explores the portrait as a pure artistic concept by playing one representational mode off against another. Visibly, his intention has been to posit the full-face posture as the most powerful mode of picturing individuals at a crucial moment of the European portrait’s history where frontal depiction began its rise although the hieratic profiled image was still practiced both in metalwork and painting. The overpowering young man’s realistic face and penetrating



41 *Portrait of a Man with a Medal of Cosimo the Elder*, Sandro Botticelli, 1474–75.  
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Inv. 1890 n. 1488. Su concessione  
del Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività culturali e del Turismo

gaze at the viewer reduce the medal's likeness to a lifeless object. Because of this feature this opus also constitutes a declarative work in favor of the chief device of the performative gaze in the portrait genre in the Renaissance. The aesthetic-philosophical basis of this development peaked in Velasquez or Rembrandt's portraits and later found a new impulse in the technological arts of photography and video, ranging from Walker Evans's and Bruce Nauman's work to contemporary rappers' musical clips characterized by up-close, intense stares.

Similarly premised on precise aesthetic views about the relationship between the seen and the seer and the act of seeing engaged in portraiture, in India under Jahangir's rule the profiled likeness, not the full face, became the most eloquent form of bodily presentation. It crystallized the highest aesthetic values in absolute—that is, independently of any project of application for specific socio-political purposes. And as in Europe, this Mughal choice had a long-lasting effect afterwards in South Asian figurative representation—for example, in eighteenth-century Rajput painting or twentieth-century Mithila-Mathubani wall figuration.

#### *PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE PROFILED PORTRAIT*

The phenomenology of the profiled figure in art holds the clues that allow one to define the values the Mughals lent this particular form. As Botticelli's double portrait dualistically demonstrates, the phenomenological scenarios of the side view and full-face depiction differ from one another in their distinct manner of addressing the world and the viewer who lives in it.<sup>28</sup> The act of glancing, or its suppression by picturing a neutral and abstract look, constitutes plainly one of the most compelling elements of differentiation, but things are far more complicated than that.

In fact, it is not the avoidance of eye contact with the audience per se that particularly interested the Mughals in the profile format. This is clear because the feature of the gaze at the viewer is absent in the three-quarter regal portrait of Jahangir, Akbar, and other members of the Mughal court, whereas it appears frequently in the representation of commoners in a firm gesture of acknowledgment of the Mughal picture's mimetic nature in continuum with the exterior world<sup>29</sup> (Figs. 20, 34). From this, it can be inferred that the Mughals did not find a solution to the semiotic issue of the gaze in the systematic adoption of the profile view but more simply they addressed it by thoughtfully choosing the look's direction when the status of the figure represented required it. Consequently, other arguments must be found to explain the Mughal canonization of the profiled portrait. Three propositions can be made.

The first possible explanation resides in the Mughal grasp and appreciation of the specific language of communication that the profile delivers. If to

achieve his aesthetic goal, Botticelli contrasts the lively naturalism of the youth's portrayal and the image of Cosimo frozen in the medal's inert matter, the profile presentation *per se* is neither lifeless nor passive. It does address the audience, not directly, but elliptically one could say. It does so by means of what equates in visual forms to pronomination in linguistics, speech, and writing—bearing in mind that a portrait is virtually vocal or mutely “talks” to the audience. The French linguist Emile Benveniste has illuminated these verbal functions of the portrait's language of communication:

The face seen from the profile is detached from the observer and belongs, with the body in action (or inert and purposeless), to a space that it shares with the other profiles on the image's surface. It corresponds approximately to the grammatical form of the third person: the pronoun “he” or “she,” unspecified, followed by the corresponding verbal form; in the place of the face turned towards the exterior that seems to convey an intention, a latent or potential gaze in the direction of the spectator, and that corresponds to the function of “I” in language, associated with “you” that is its necessary complement.<sup>30</sup>

Botticelli's picture offers a concrete demonstration of this process of pronomination in the profile portraiture's phenomenology. The young man seems overtly to call out to the viewer to signify to him or her something like “this is me; my name is such and such; here I am ...” as in Hyacinthe Rigaud's royal portrait in which the poser tells the spectator with his look and body language, “I am Louis XIV, King of France.” In the Renaissance master's double portrait, the still and mute likeness of Cosimo clearly cannot declare its identity or call the audience's attention upon him, but the youth's gesture of brandishing the medal does so on his behalf. One can almost hear the youth telling us, “Here he is, the Medici patriarch ...” In other words, while the fully exposed performative portrait summons the viewer, “look at me!” in the profiled image a silent voice pointedly interjects, “look at him or at her!” For in any profiled portrait, the figure's presence is signaled or named by someone else, a third person, either virtual and invisible, or present and visible as in Botticelli's work. In summary, the profiled likeness is a pronominal form of portraiture.

This indirect communication with the viewer instituted by the side view also induces the viewer's particular experience of seeing without being seen. The latter can immerse himself or herself in a calm, meditative gazing at the painted subject as well as an undisturbed inspection of it since the portrait's facial expression does not interfere in the process. In other words, the profiled likeness induces the most de-dramatized mode of looking at portraits for a more observational than conversational experience of the painted figure.

It is my conviction that the Mughals cognized and valued the phenomenological properties of the profile presentation, the indirectness of the relationship between the seer and the likeness, the virtual multiplication

of the actors in this relationship, the painted figure's introverted-ness, the image's ability to let the viewer serenely observe the subject without interference, and so on.

*SPECIFIC PERCEPTUAL QUALITIES AND PROPERTIES OF THE PROFILED PORTRAIT*

The second possible explanation for the Mughals' fondness for the side positioning of the figure in portraiture lies in the liking of a specific perceptual quality inherent to any profiled form—namely, the high definition and precision of the morphological description it delivers. The features of high definition and precision that, in the Mughal context, derive from the assertive but abstract pattern of the silhouette in Sultanate painting, appear cognizably enhanced in Mughal portraits although by means of slightly different plastic strategies. Instead of the thick Sultanate tracery, a thin but also sharp and continuous line shapes the Mughal figures, similarly to early Renaissance profiled portraiture (Figs. 3, 6, 8, 13–14, 17, 40).

The twentieth-century exiled Spanish novelist Agustín Gómez-Arcos described in one word, "clarity," the particular qualities of the profiled figure itself and the impression the sight of it may produce. In *L'Agneau carnivore* (*The Carnivorous Lamb*), Gómez-Arcos describes a triangular scene with two protagonists facing each other and an observer who tells about what she witnessed to an external party. Gómez-Arcos's simple description of this scene could serve as a structuralist model for the phenomenological reconstitution of the Mughal experience of a profiled likeness: "Two male profiles whose clarity would have moved you."<sup>31</sup> Gómez-Arcos's comment not only pinpoints the crucial pronominal pattern but also highlights the equation "profile = clarity," which was pivotal to the making of Jahangiri and Shahjahani imperial portraiture. Again, outside of any semiotic projection or input, this portraiture evidences the Mughal's conscious prizing of the clarity of the profile view, fully exploited in the increasing acuteness of depictions that deliver a hyper-lucid account of a figure's morphology, although a fortiori only partial or truncated.

Besides, this lucidity of the figural treatment in the portraits only reflects that of Mughal imagery in general which, despite the unceasing experiments with colors, purely painterly textures, and atmospheric effects, remains faithful to the techniques of drawing and contouring, and to clear-cut forms and designs. In the Mughal aesthetic consciousness, clarity seems indeed to have supplanted other aesthetic properties such as suggestion or evocation. Even during the Shahjahani period, when Mughal pictorial naturalism reached its peak, the Mughals never compromised on this ground (Fig. 8).

The last, but not least, of the profiled form's assets that may explain its canonization in Mughal painting, consists of its capacity to keep the focus on the represented subject's morphological phenomenality. The side presentation

is the most extroverted form of portraiture, as it places the accent on the face's outer relief, shows its most complex edges in direct contact with the exterior space, and renders this contact-point fully visible and hyper-phenomenal. Therefore, profiled figuration has the highest capacity for pinpointing the subject's most outer features in the intricate intertwinement of physiological and psychological traits in someone's appearance. In the spectrum of portrait postures, the profile thus constitutes the opposite pole to the frontal view, which is the most introverted formula, and in-between is the three-quarter position, which provides the most comprehensive but also the most complicated account of the individual represented.

Even though, contrary to the view of many, I contend psychological rendering was not neglected in Mughal portraiture, in privileging the profile, the Mughals seem to have conferred special significance upon the individual's most external physiognomic traits. Unlike the Western classical art of the portrait, which sought to suppress or blur the apparent distinction between the subject's morphology and his or her inner characteristics, the Mughal profiled likeness not only preserves this divide but posits it emphatically. In the paintings and drawings, an omnipresent thin delineating graphic contour underlines and foregrounds the figure's anatomical design in such compelling fashion that it puts the subject's corporeal presence at the center of the imagistic semantic. That is also the case even in the most penetrating portraits of Shah Jahan's period,

This particular plastic orientation reveals the deep roots of Mughal figuration in the Indian metaphysics of the body, which pre-Mughal Sultanate painting conveyed in its vitalistic aesthetic and transmitted to Mughal art. In line with Sultanate tradition, in Mughal human representation the profile is given the assignment of empowering the phenomenality of the figure of the body—but with this essential difference: the profiled depiction expands the body's phenomenality with the supplement of “the figure of the (profiled) face” bearing the individuals' verisimilar physiognomic singularities. If the Mughal portrait has thus inserted in the conceptual vitalism of pre-Mughal Sultanate pictoriality the factual diversity of mankind, its profile fixture still operates as a visual reminder and conveyer of the Indic concept of the body-logos/body-cultural matrix. In forming a perceptual boundary between the two worlds of thought and matter and its sub-sphere of mind and body, both deposited in the representation of the Mughal human subjects, the profile maintains active the dialectic between the concept of corporeality and its manifest reality as if to prevent the portrait from losing its pure philosophical essence by letting the factuality of the mundane have a full grip.

These observations lead me to assert that the profiled likeness—that is, the clearest, sharpest, and most directly legible display of the human form in the art of portraiture—was perceived by the Mughals as the most valued and effective way to convey and communicate the represented subject's identity.

### New Levels of Semantization: The Mythologized and Iconified Imperial Portrait

In her novel *The Cleft*, Doris Lessing asks, “How long did it take for Astre and Maire to become more than themselves?”<sup>32</sup> In this tale of a reinvented origin of Creation, Astre and Maire are immemorial females that over time become goddesses. As in pictorial fiction in which the world can be reinvented, the Mughals likewise could become “more than themselves,” in the form of irradiating haloed beings superior to the rest of humanity. “How long did it take”?

For the Mughals it took a generation, the time for the Mughal practice of realistic likeness to settle into a firm artistic tradition. Having inherited this pictorial art painstakingly founded by Akbar and his artists, Jahangir could leisurely remodel it according to his desires. The simply human Akbari model assuredly could not satisfy a monarch preoccupied with issues of self-definition in relation to his illustrious father and naturally driven to imprint the Mughal memory with his own creations. The Jahangiri conjuncture was ripe for giving the Mughal imperial portrait more complex semiotic assignments. Thus, if Akbar gave rise to the Mughal doctrine of a luminous, divinely appointed ruler of stratospheric dimension, it was Jahangir who translated it into an aesthetic of light applied to the visual depiction of the Mughal dynasts<sup>33</sup> (Fig. 3). Jahangir also initiated the elaborate project of genealogical portraiture of the dynasty, one in which he figures prominently. This project was supported by the innovative use of strategies of discursive symbolism and allegory in pictures intricately mixing reality and fiction, and history and myth.

Although they have monopolized a great deal of scholarly effort, these new assignments of the Mughal imperial portrait as well as the cultural impulses that informed them remain unclear in many aspects. For example, this aesthetic of light did not confer upon the Mughal sovereign the status of a prophet or an imam in the Shi’ite sense. But how to interpret the representation of the emperor in celestial levitations, constellated with a miscellany of iconic and aniconic signs of divine presence, cross-cultural symbols from Eastern and Western myths and allusions to legendary figures such as Solomon, Majnun, or Orpheus?<sup>34</sup> And what is the exact meaning of this even more intriguing and most misunderstood strategy of coupling the Mughal imperial image with a frankly Christian iconography (Fig. 42)?

Relying on a too-literal reading of iconographic evidences, scholarly studies leave something to be desired when it comes to interpreting the aesthetic workings and precise significances of these complex figurations. In addition, art historians do not always agree on the cultural origin of this hybrid symbolism, disputing, for example, the Persian or European identity of emblematic animals at the feet of imperial figures, recurrent in paintings (Fig. 3). I wish not to engage in this archeological debate but to propose



42 *Portrait of Jahangir with Jesus*, Jahangir by Hashim, c. 1615–20, and Jesus by Abu'l-Hasan, c. 1610–20. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. Chester Beatty Library. © Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin

instead a hermeneutics of this imagistic phenomenon. Again, the debatable question of the European artistic current in Mughal painting is at the heart of this hermeneutics.

*EUROPEAN INSPIRATION IN THE JAHANGIRI SEMANTIZATION OF THE IMPERIAL IMAGE*

Although the European material cannot be considered a foundational source in Mughal imagistic metaphysics and only played a supplemental role in its elaboration, it nevertheless offered more than a convenient source of exotic iconography. For example, European art was a pivotal inspiration for Jahangir's construction of the Mughal imperial portrait's visual discourse. Beyond the evidence provided by the Akbari texts to explain the source of this symbolism of light in the Mughal imperial portrait, the idea of using this European pictorial material in the Mughal repertoire has much to do with this material's penetrating impact on Jahangiri aesthetic consciousness particularly in the domain of the expression of the sacred, the religious, and other forms of enlightenment. At the center of a complicated, multifold dynamic of cultural impulses, European art had a truly catalytic effect in the sense that it somehow brought to the Mughals the confirmation that their own philosophy of light had great aesthetic semantic-semiotic potential and could be similarly explored. Especially, as Catherine Asher explained, the Mughals understood the usefulness of this aesthetic potential to address the empire's Hindu subjects, accustomed to explicit plastic renderings of spiritual phenomena of illumination and other divine manifestations.<sup>35</sup>

One could wonder then, why not establish instead a direct connection between these non-Islamic Indian forms and Jahangir's visualization of the Akbari conception of the divine light as deposited in the emperor's persona? The Indian visual landscape offers in sheer abundance stellar, solar, and fire symbolic patterns. Providing answers to this difficult question forces one again to conjecture. While the Indic-Mughal cross-cultural connection certainly informed the process of visualization of the Mughal concept of divine light, the non-Islamic Indian arts could hardly have constituted a direct stimulus because of their polytheistic nature or association with forbidden forms of belief from the Islamic perspective. Therefore it would be a mistake to detect in this iconography a literal transfer of Shiva or Surya's formal divine attributes into Mughal portraiture. This pictorial symbolism actually is an outcome of a complex and subtly logical conjunction of factors.

Living in an Indian milieu, the Mughal mind and eye was well acquainted with and trained in visual thinking, and particularly well-disposed to appreciate and understand the rhetoric of European imagery. This favorable predisposition was reinforced and encouraged by an essential aspect of this European imagery, its monotheistic sacred tradition. This fact of culture, this predisposition, strongly implies that while studying, copying, and adapting

European art, the Mughals became easily persuaded of the tremendous rhetorical power that a perceptual formulation of abstract religious concepts such as illumination and divine election could have in the framework of monotheism. This phenomenon must have had a ricocheting, sharpening effect on the Mughal emperor's appreciation of Indian non-Islamic artworks as powerful materializations of idealities and abstractions of the relationship between the human and the divine. Consequently, it appears reasonable to contend that the pictorial theme of the haloed Mughal emperor is nothing less than the product of the interface between these external and internal cultural-artistic forces, and the reflection in visuality of a complex phenomenon of aesthetic consciousness in which the European stimulus had a decisive part. The allegorical constructs that stage this irradiating portrait of the Mughal ruler result as well from the same complex intercultural synergy.

*THE ISLAMIC BACKGROUND OF THE JAHANGIRI PICTORIAL ALLEGORIES*

With the introduction of the pictorial allegory, the Jahangir creative mind added new characteristics to the visualized register of imperial qualities and virtues. But some of these characteristics are far from self-evident. For example, scholars concluded that the explicit symbolic content of the Mughal allegorical tableaux portrays a multifaceted supra-human emperor variably "represented" as Solomon, Orpheus, or Majnun.<sup>36</sup> Although this iconography seemingly depicts an otherworldly ruler without limits, it actually operates within the human ontological sphere and not beyond. By no means did the Mughal emperor pretend to be the alter ego of the Islamic King-Prophet Solomon or of the pagan Orpheus. The interpretation necessitates greater nuance. Jahangir himself could not have been more clear about who he thought he was and what Mughal rulers stand for when he humbly declared in his autobiography, *Tuzuk-I Jahangiri*:

Thou are the mighty O Lord,  
 Thou are the cherisher of rich and poor;  
 I'm not a world-conqueror or law-giver,  
 I'm one of the beggars at this gate.  
 Help me in what is good and right,  
 Else what good comes from me to any one?  
 I am a master of servants,  
 To the Lord I'm a loyal servant.<sup>37</sup>

In this declaration Jahangir tells us indirectly but unambiguously that the subject hyperbolically described in the pictorial allegories he commissioned is only the "master of servants." In detail, "master" stands for the Mughal dynast, Muslim ruler of the global community of men, all God's "servants" according to the Muslim faith. His son Shah Jahan did not question this

Islamic foundation either. Therefore, interpreting this type of Mughal image in terms of “representation” misconstrues its approach. The modus operandi of the symbolism in these paintings is, necessarily, of another order, one that involves neither equation nor equivalency.

A more plausible, alternative explanation posits the pictorial and literary allusions to Solomon, Orpheus, or another otherworldly superhero as rhetorical elements in another new formula of portraiture that Jahangir and his artists invented: the pictorial panegyric. This aggrandizing aesthetic presentation of the Mughal sovereign relies on the associative mode of symbolization by analogy and metaphor. It consists of a referential symbolic system that draws analogies and builds metaphors between the referrer (the Mughal emperor) and the refereed (Solomon, Orpheus, or Majnun), while excluding any identification (representation) between them as a matter of principle. The visual discourse this system produces could be verbally translated in a wording of this type: “the Mughal dynast possesses a wisdom and ethic qualities of Solomonic magnitude but *it goes without saying* that he is neither a new Solomon nor a king-prophet ...” or “his unequalled political integrity and just authority are like Orpheus’s music, they allow him to eradicate effortlessly any rebellion or hostility, but *it goes without saying* that the emperor does not have the Greek myth’s magic powers ...” and so on and so forth.

If in the Jahangiri allegories the symbolic reference to the aforementioned scriptural and literary figures lends the emperor the exceptional traits of human character their mythology enhances, it does not identify him with a new prophet, a wizard, or a commander of the djinns and the animals, not even symbolically. Instead, by gathering up all these exceptional qualities in the imagistic presentation of the Mughal emperor, this referential system crafts a hyperbolic picture of the dynast as the ideal but temporal and a fortiori Muslim commander of men by God’s will and Grace. In effect, this hyperbolic formula of portraiture paradoxically mythologizes the Mughal monarch without turning him into a myth; it posits his persona and deeds as ultimate living paradigms of Muslim leadership and conduct strictly within the rational limits of the human realm.

#### ICONIFICATION OF THE IMPERIAL PORTRAIT

With Shah Jahan’s patronage, the Mughal imperial image exhausted its licit rhetorical possibilities with the mythologizing panegyric fleshed out into the emperor’s icon (Figs. 13–14). Although the process of iconification began with Jahangir, who promoted the imagistic model of the stellar profiled likeness, it is Shah Jahan who crystallized it and fixedly gave the imperial portrait the authority of a full-fledged icon. While in the paintings Jahangir presented multiple visages (profile or three-quarter-view, haloed or plain), Shah Jahan’s

portrait became a fixed image immediately recognizable through a limited but strongly semiotic range of features—essentially the man’s realistic profile with patterns of light around the head and other emblematic attributes such as heavy jewels. These features appear virtually unchanged and repeated ad infinitum regardless of the picture’s narrative context.

Secular in nature but phenomenologically operating like a religious icon, the Shahjahani likeness had thus obtained its highest function in the history of Mughal portraiture, the function of a profane devotional image for the subjects’ devotion to their supreme temporal master, the Mughal sovereign, though himself only God’s humble servant. With this new formula of the iconified portrait, the Mughal sovereign’s image got as close to the sacred as it possibly could but “*without a possibility of ever approaching nearer*” or “*without the possibility of ever reaching,*” as James Joyce described any desire of metaphysical expansion toward the divine, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.<sup>38</sup>

This highly semantized Jahangiri and Shahjahani imagery working in the symbolic mode also brought Mughal painting aesthetically closer than ever to the non-Islamic Indian art of figurative representation. Not only did the phenomenality of the Mughal emperor’s body, tremendously empowered by the combination of the realism of its appearances with hyperbolic symbolism, acquire an equivalent force to Indic figures in painting, architecture, and dance but also like them, this body became itself more than a represented existence: it became a language, a discursive form in which the order of the world was inscribed. For example, Jahangir shooting with his bow and arrow at the personification of poverty may be viewed as a historic Muslim human parallel to the Hindu goddess Durga fighting the evil god Mahisa (Fig. 3).

The same aesthetic logic and referential system also presided over the integration of Christian iconography in the Mughal imperial portrait, to be examined next. But this inquiry first returns to the Mughal intellectual context that informed this Christian appropriation. The transcultural phenomenon I call “the humanist convergence” underlies Christian-Mughal portraiture.<sup>39</sup>

### The Humanist Convergence

In the late 1980s, scholars like Gauvin Bailey recognized that movements of thought paralleling Renaissance humanism existed outside Europe. For instance, Bailey wrote that Jesuit missionaries at the Mughal court, “true Christian humanists,” “also encountered the Mughals’ own Renaissance—a climate of creativity, experimentation, and tolerance that made their culture one of the most sophisticated on earth.”<sup>40</sup> But save only scarce attempts to develop this idea into a substantial argument, only recently have studies

on global cultures and histories approached with greater depth and proper critical methods this transcultural trope of a plural humanism.

Two books in particular have moved in this direction. In the 2009 collection of essays *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective, Experiences and Expectations*, humanism “is brought to life as a synthesis of transcultural values and a mutual and critical recognition of cultural differences.”<sup>41</sup> More recently, *The Renaissance and the Ottoman World* (2013), examines the cultural interactions between early Modern Europe and Islam.<sup>42</sup> In waiting for an analogous inclusive work comparing the early Modern Mughal Empire and the Renaissance, a selection of ideas from the existing publications will serve the purpose of this inquiry.

#### MULTIPLE VIEWS AND DIVERSE FINDINGS OF THE STUDIES

In a quest for answers to the many questions raised by plastic realism and European iconography in Mughal painting, historians of Mughal art have naturally privileged analyses of the well-documented phenomena of the circulation of objects and people between India and the West, specifically the introduction of the Counter-Reformation *arte sacra* by Jesuit missionaries to the Mughal court. Only a few scholars have pondered the possible philosophical convergences and divergences between the two cultural areas. In addition, findings in the scholarly literature are often questionable and inconsistent in their conclusions, as they depend on the nature of the expertise involved, either socio-historical, art archaeological, or art historical. Basically, the studies relying on artistic evidence contradict results brought forth by experts in South Asian socio-history. While art historians like Gauvin Bailey and Som Prakash Verma tell us, in summary, that Mughal culture was “profoundly influenced by the humanism of Renaissance Italy,” historians like Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam on the contrary describe a situation in which the Mughals appeared tolerant and open to European culture and its people while also maintaining a firm distance.<sup>43</sup> Each of these two views falls short when it comes to sorting out the dual phenomenon of the humanist convergence and its consequences for Mughal arts.

The problem with Alam and Subrahmanyam’s works is not their quality or methodology but their scope, which is restricted for epistemic reasons by their choice of approach and material. Focused on an analysis of primary sources, these scholars are preoccupied with Mughal history and cultural context; therefore, to them artworks constitute primarily archival objects reflecting the historical data upon which they found their research. Their studies shed light on many aspects of the Mughal intellectual, cultural, and political life—in particular, the Mughal-Christian relationships in the empire that closely concern the issue of Christian iconography in Mughal painting. Yet they elucidate neither the Mughal conceptualization of Christian art nor

the elusive philosophical linkage that necessarily subtended it. What Alam and Subrahmanyam's inquiries into the religious disputations in the Mughal palace's *ibadatkhana* (a kind of conference room) unravel is the psychology of the cultural encounter, which was marked by tension, friction, antagonistic attitudes, and other reactions.<sup>44</sup> This is what the primary sources record and reveal—tension—expected where pluralistic thoughts and diverse opinions collide. The argument of the Mughal playful use of Christian art derives from these analyses, as well as the plain evidence of the Catholic failure to convert the Mughals. In a lecture delivered in 2011 at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Sanjay Subrahmanyam even talked about the “recycled” Christian imagery in Mughal art.<sup>45</sup>

However, these primary sources are often limited in their informative delivery and are mute about the less palpable repercussions of the Christian-Mughal encounter on a deeper level of consciousness, or more accurately about the Mughal hosts' consciousness that interests us. The evidenced existence of Christianized wall paintings prominently visible in imperial architecture and the association of Christian figures with the Mughal emperor's image in book art suffice to prove that the effect of the encounter in question was far more penetrating than yet acknowledged by scholars or suggested by historical documentation (Fig. 42). These facts of artistic culture signal a more thoughtful Mughal apprehension of the Christian influx not simply as a provider of pleasing art forms and entertaining ideas but also as a conveyer of the monotheistic faith, with the interesting particularities that the Christian faith rests upon a carnal knowledge and that its metaphysical conception authorizes the figurability of God owing to its principle of divine incarnation in Christ.

The truth, however, is that the hermeneutics of Christian imagery in the discursive-symbolic framework of the Mughal imperial visuality is a difficult task and fully open to debate. Yet, certainly, the presence of this iconography should not be seen in the light of the resistance, or mockery, if not hostility that the Muslim scholars and clerics, caught in complex power relations and intellectual rivalry, could ostensibly have manifested toward the Jesuits during sessions in the *ibadatkhana*. Conversely, the reception of the Jesuit arts and theater at the Mughal court, well considered in Bailey's studies, does not necessarily indicate “a profound influence” of Renaissance humanism on Mughal culture. This undue claim does not accurately describe the humanist convergence between Europe and Mughal India, as it wrongly implies that the former somehow shaped the latter's system of thought. Although Christian figuration in Mughal imperial imagery indicates a special linkage of Mughal Islam with the Christian influx, this linkage did not a fortiori take the form of a transformational intervention. One pitfall in particular is to be cautioned against in the interpretive proceedings.

Tricked by evidence of the works' transcontinental stylistic appearance, Bailey, Verma, and others who adhere to the same scholarly current tend to confuse parallelisms in thinking mode, aesthetics, and stylistic choices with an actual transfer and presence of values and patterns from Renaissance humanism to the Mughal cultural space. This approach elliptically obliterates the existence of the original and rich Mughal humanism that owes nothing to its European associates but certainly shares affinities with them. As I have begun to show in the discussion on Akbari sky iconography, the intellectual and artistic intercourse between the two cultures was of a different nature, supported by multiple bridges between them, consciously cognized or not, or just present to subconsciously facilitate the Mughal reception of the European stream.

### **Mughal and Renaissance Humanism: For a Concord of Truth**

In 1987, the *Marg* issue, *Mirror of Princes, the Mughals and the Medici* provided a comparative viewing of Mughal and Florentine humanism. It must be noted though that it did not incite much new research. In the introduction, Kapila Vatsyayan summarized three main contentions: "What links the two [cultures], at the fundamental level, is the changed attitude [toward] Nature"; "Now man is important"; "Now, when Man (i.e., the emperor) is the giver of justice, is the center of the universe, then life like painting is necessary."<sup>46</sup> A critique of these statements provides an opportunity to debate the humanist convergence between the two cultures.

#### *DID THE ATTITUDE TOWARD NATURE CHANGE IN THE MUGHAL ERA?*

More precisely, is the Mughal artistic realism an indication of such a change and is it to be credited to a shift in the mode of world-apprehension and philosophical practices like in the humanist movement in Renaissance Florence?<sup>47</sup> To address these questions, a fundamental conceptual distinction between "attitude toward" and "presentation of" Nature must be made, as the *Marg* articles do not ostensibly take this distinction into account.

An attitude toward Nature is a product of thought that assigns to the phenomenal world a particular place within a particular conception of the universe, even when this conception denies the very idea of metaphysics by reducing it to physics or dissolving it in nihilism. Simply put, an attitude toward Nature is a purely metaphysical attitude. In art-making generally, "the attitude [toward] Nature" is something else. It means its re-presentation (re-presentation = presentation + representation), aesthetic portrayal, and visualization in the artifice of imagistic forms. Re-presentation determines the specific appearances of Nature in the image whose conformity or

nonconformity with objective reality depends on the agencies' aesthetic vision and stylistic choices. Consequently, re-presenting Nature implicates a philosophy of aesthetic order, different from the prehension of it in a purely metaphysical perspective—that is, an aesthetic-representational metaphysics I alternatively term “an attitude toward form.” In sum, on one hand there is the attitude *toward Nature*, and on the other hand, there is the attitude *toward form* engaged in its re-presentation. While plainly the attitude toward or philosophy of Nature and its pictorial re-presentation are correlated, the modalities of this correlation are also mediated and determined by two other fundamental parameters—namely, the compound of intents and sensitivities of strictly aesthetic essence and the possibilities offered by technicalities and logistics supporting the artistic practice in a given context.

It is clear then that having confused “attitude toward” and “re-presentation of” Nature, the *Marg* publication's authors mistakenly discerned in the Mughal rationalization of the picture a shift in pure metaphysics. The Mughals would thus have reinvented a metaphysical system of their own that, by analogy with the Renaissance phenomenon, would have entailed a reconceptualization of the image based on plastic mimesis. And therein lies the danger of this comparative exercise, in approaching like a quasi-scientific model of transcendental reach the Florentine humanist reconfiguration of the medieval Scholastic metaphysics and its translation in the arts by means of plastic naturalism.<sup>48</sup> Nothing of this sort took place in early Modern Mughal India, and it was not a new *attitude toward* in the sense of *conception* of the phenomenal world that brought closeness between this polity's humanism and Renaissance Florence's. Recalling elements of common knowledge about the foundation of Mughal metaphysics will demonstrate this.

At its conceptual core, the Mughal worldview was Islamic. Not even Akbar's hybridized doctrinal reformulation *Din-I Ilahi* (*Divine Faith*) questioned or refuted the Islamic anchorage of Mughal metaphysics. In the Qur'an, Nature is a central entity as God's creation, a tangible proof or “sign” (*aya*) of His existence, benevolence, and omniscience, and His great gift to mankind. Throughout the Qur'an, the text abundantly describes and praises the phenomenal world for the beauty of its constitutive elements and creatures reverberating God's ineffable perfection. For example, in *Surat al-Ghashiyat* (*The Overwhelming*, 88), verses 17–20 invite the faithful to gaze directly, rationally, and thoughtfully at Nature's grandiose structure:

Then do they not look at the camels—how they are created?  
 And at the sky—how it is raised?  
 And at the mountains—how they are erected?  
 And at the earth—how it is spread out?  
 Remind them, for you [Prophet Muhammad] are just a reminder.

Awareness of this ontology of Nature as *aya* partakes of the religious consciousness of all the adherents to the Islamic faith. That the mode of picturing this divine gift, the natural world, varied and changed from one Islamic geo-cultural area to another is then a strict matter of attitude toward form and representational philosophy, the content of which rests upon the specifics of each of these areas' aesthetics, in particular its aesthetic style of seeing contextually informed. To be more precise, the nature of the visual representation of Nature—no pun intended here—depends on the function assigned to the image as artistic medium, itself determined by the type of cultural optics particular to each Islamic milieu. This is why I have stressed the context of the non-monotheistic body-centered cultural landscape of India in the elaboration of both the pre-Modern Sultanate and the early Modern Mughal empirical mode of world-apprehension projected in images, thus marking a rupture with the internalizing poetics-forged Persian visual culture.

If by virtue of the Persian gazing style (or cultural optics) early Modern Persian painting does not depict Nature imitatively, by no means does this signal a philosophical detachment. On the contrary, in the Persian picture the oneiric and pristine landscapes imbued with a superlative rhetorical function only attest to a hyperconscious *attitude toward* the universe's terrestrial attributes in the Persian aesthetic consciousness, in tune in this regard with the Islamic substrate of the early Modern Persianate worldview. On the other hand, what the surreal Persian portrayal of natural elements reflects and stems from is a linguistic attitude toward and conception of the pictorial forms in the context of a fundamentally logocentric culture. Following the same analytical logic, in comparison with Persian art the naturalism of Mughal painting does not bespeak a superior sensitivity or enhanced philosophical consideration for the mundane realm, since all Persianate cultures share the same understanding of Nature derived from the Qur'an. This Mughal turn of figural regime was instead the logical outcome of the shift of gazing modalities caused by the immersive experience of Indian visuality in which the figure-body constitutes the most powerful mode of communication, and figurality the main activator of cognitivity.

Finally, what the Mughal pictorial realism responds to is the brute force of a direct mode of seeing acquired in the subcontinent, under which the Persianate introvert internalizing eye yielded to the Indian extrovert "savage" eye, as André Breton once described the organ allowing an unmediated optical-empirical grasp of the world.<sup>49</sup>

*DIVERGENCE INTERTWINED WITH CONVERGENCE IN THE MUGHAL AND RENAISSANCE HUMANIST PARALLELISM*

Clearly, things followed a different path in Renaissance Florence. While accepting the foundations of the Christian doctrine, Italian humanists

transformed the Scholastics' metaphysical outlook on the Christian order of things by reconceptualizing the here-and-now of this world and Man's existence in it. They redefined concreteness with distinctive ontological contours not present in Christian medieval thought, and they did so owing to the revisiting and rediscovery of pagan antiquity's literature and philosophy.<sup>50</sup> Consequently, in Renaissance Florence, unlike the Mughal Empire, the imitative presentation of Nature in art was indirectly linked to a change of visual regime, as above all it sprang from the philosophical act of quasi-freeing concreteness from the binding dialectic between divinity and humanity in which the Scholastics had enclosed it.<sup>51</sup> By inference, in the Italian context the new cultural optics and the rationalization of the pictorial metaphysics are only the intertwined consequences of this philosophical act just evoked.

The Mughals did not have to undergo such a philosophical deconstruction. Being Muslims they already had an acute rational and existential sense of Nature, although paradoxically this sense was not acquired by the deconstructive work of reason but rather given by divine decree and consigned in the Qur'an. In other words, whereas in Italy the causes of the rise of positivist figurality are to be found in purely intellectual constructs, turns, and moves, in the Mughal Empire it is essentially the empirical phenomenon of the displacement from one cultural environment to another that provoked this rise, with all the socio-psychic-aesthetic shifts this entailed.

Invalidating the argument of a Mughal change of attitude toward Nature now redirects the focus on its re-presentation in painting and the particular observational attitude toward form and conception of visuality that it reflects. The latter are aspects of Mughal culture that indeed bridge early Modern Mughal India and Italy. Both shared a desire to contemplate the truth of the lived world in images and sought to have an immersible experience of the pictorial space. The Mughal and Italian Renaissance picturing modes also present non-trivial similarities. The Mughal institution of a primarily iconic pictoriality through the detextualization and rationalization of the Persian sematography echoes the plastic methods by which the new Florentine illusionist order emerged from the aesthetic deconstruction of Italo-Byzantine painting. Importantly, both picturing modes institutionalized "the positive appearance of Man" and the physiognomic portrait genre, the ultimate aesthetic manifestation of ocularcentrism.<sup>52</sup> But then, if one pursues further the comparative logic, does this parallel also entail another one: a humanist positing of Man as center of the universe in both cultural milieus? The *Marg* number's authors suggest that the rise of Man underpinning the institutionalization of realistic depiction of human representation in Europe equally concerned early Modern Mughal India. Or, to reformulate the question by appropriating again Martin Jay's insights on European visuality, does this turn of representational philosophy signal in Mughal India, as in Renaissance Florence, "a connection between ocularcentrism and the rise of Man"?<sup>53</sup>

Though on aesthetic grounds the Renaissance concept of Man, positively recognizable in its individuality and exposed in its humanity, applies to Mughal human representation, the humanist idea of “the rise of Man” consubstantial to this concept does not. For in Mughal thought, like Nature, Mankind did not undergo any fundamental ontological repositioning. The Mughal ruler’s human status was inflated during Akbar’s reign, but the Islamic order of the universe contoured in the Qur’an and at the basis of the Mughal metaphysics was not modified in depth. Man is God’s creature; therefore, men and women must submit themselves to their almighty Creator—that is, be Muslim using their full abilities endowed by reason, consciousness, and judgment.

A habit of Akbar reported by one of his chroniclers illustrates well this Mughal understanding of Islamic human ontology. After the “feast of truth” during the animated jousts in *ibadatkhana* in which different views on the subject could be offered, Abdul Qadir Badauni observed,

His Majesty spent whole nights in praising God; he continually occupied himself in pronouncing *Ya Huwa*, and *Ya hadi*, in which he was well versed. His heart was full of reverence for Him, who is the true Giver, and from a feeling of thankfulness for his past [military] successes he would sit many a morning alone in prayer and meditation on a large flat stone of an old building which lay near the palace in a lonely spot, with his head bent over his chest, gathering the bliss of the early hours of dawn.<sup>54</sup>

It is worth noting here that long before the Renaissance, Islam produced a positivist philosophy empowering reason and the critical consciousness that shared in a rich Islamic intellectual lore and included the literal interpretation of religious scriptures and mystic literature.<sup>55</sup> One may ascertain that in the Mughals’ Islamic context, men and women did not rise above or beyond their condition of being Muslim but rather used their power of reflection to better comprehend the meaning and implications of this condition to philosophically reinforce their piety. Nor did the secular tendency that helped reshape intellectual life in Renaissance Europe have a parallel in Mughal India.<sup>56</sup> In the Mughal Empire, religion and theological discussions constituted an essential activity in a kind of scholastic way, one might say.

All these remarks considered together prompt a major interrogation: if early Modern Mughal humanism does not meet Florentine thought regarding the rise of Man, the new outlook on Nature, and the secularism of philosophy, where is the humanist convergence in question situated?

“GAZING UPON MANY TRUTHS ...”

The emphasis on reason and its use to question or challenge traditional modes of thinking constitutes a solid common denominator in Mughal and

Florentine humanism. As the historian Seyed Ali Nadeem Rezavi explains, "The *Ibadatkhana* was an instrument of 'tolerance' for the imposition of 'Reason.'" Throughout his [Akbar's] reign there was a stress on reason (*'aql*), which was to be given precedence over traditionalism (*taqlid*)."<sup>57</sup> But more than that, the humanist convergence lies in the embrace of a principle that Percy Shelley magnificently captured in his poem *Epipsychidion*:

[Love is like] understanding, that grows bright,  
Gazing upon many truths (lines 162–3)

Mughal India and Renaissance Florence converge on this crucial point in their humanist philosophies: consciously "gazing upon many truths"; that is, a planned exploration of systems of ideas external or detached from the religious-philosophical establishment.<sup>58</sup> Akbar argues this principle of intersectional thinking, which he set out to implement at his court, in 1582 in a letter addressed to an unknown European authority, perhaps King Philip II of Spain:

As most men are fettered by the bond of tradition, and by imitating the ways followed by their fathers, ancestors, relatives, acquaintance, everyone continues, without investigating the arguments and reasons, to follow the religion in which he was born and educated, thus excluding himself from the possibilities of ascertaining the truth, which is the noblest aim of the human intellect. Therefore we associate at convenient seasons with learned men of all religions, and thus derive profit from their exquisite discourses and exalted aspirations.<sup>59</sup>

The outcome of this mode of thinking was, at a certain level, also similar in early Modern Mughal India and Italy. Akbar and his successors' efforts to reconcile Islam with the many other cultures within the empire enabled an uncovering and rediscovering of the philosophical-religious connections and validities between different forms of knowledge, which are at the source of the Mughal transculturalism in literature, poetry, philosophy, and art. Likewise, in Renaissance Florence the sustained endeavor to detect linkages under the antagonizing appearances of a priori impossible pairings such as polytheism-monotheism, Greek philosophy-Christian thought, or mythology-sacred history, made it possible to establish an uninterrupted chain of truth and to form compatibilities such as Plato and Christ or Venus and Mary that were otherwise unthinkable. The fusion between Christian and pagan iconography and between medieval and Antique plasticity are the product of these new thinking modalities. However, if humanist literature expounds and theorizes the logic of this processing of Greco-Roman heritage, there exists no Mughal equivalent enabling us to comprehend the meaning of Christian representations associated with the imperial image. Therefore, again one must engage in creative thinking.

### Jesus, Mary, the Angels, and the Mughal Emperor

One may notice that this heading sounds like a motion picture by Peter Greenaway or Claude Sautet.<sup>60</sup> As in a movie, the paintings presenting the Mughal emperor surrounded by Jesus, Mary, and a retinue of angels tell a narrative that revolves around these main characters (Fig. 42). The other protagonists one may see here and there, such as Sufi sheikhs, function like extras or play supporting roles in terms of frequency of appearance and participation in these works' visual unfolding. However, unlike in film, there is no script or dialogue to let one know the precise assignment given to the story's protagonists. One can only ascertain that a distinctively significant aesthetic event is taking place in these pictorial displays whose meaning is up to speculation. Two main scenarios have been proposed.

According to the first scenario, the Christian imagery's significance would have been transferred to the Mughal paintings' system of meaning production in order to promote and give a figural shape to the Mughal historical-political discourse. Basically, with a few doctrinal adjustments and additions of new semiotic layers fitting Mughal views, this imagery would now serve to represent non-Christian entities and deliver predicaments from the Mughal dynastic history and sacred history. For example, Bailey contends that the Madonna would incarnate the Mongol Queen Alanqoa, the Mughals' legendary mother-ancestor. He asserts, "There is little doubt that Jesus represented the emperor himself and Mary symbolized his genealogy through his female lineage."<sup>61</sup>

This scholar's argument rests upon the Muslim view of Jesus and Mary, which is elaborated on in Mughal, Persian, and Ottoman texts and poetized in Sufi literature. More particularly, Mughal panegyrics employ the holy figure of Jesus as a comparative paradigm to hyperbolically describe the Mughal emperor.<sup>62</sup> It is true that based on this Muslim-Persianate apprehension of the mother and son, "It naturally follows that Mughal artists encoded the same meanings into portraits of these holy figures."<sup>63</sup> However, as for the pictorial juxtapositions involving Orpheus, Solomon, and Majnun, these instances of Christian-Mughal portraiture do not feature any association beyond the comparison, analogy, and metaphor. No extrapolation in the written sources supports this thesis of representation that suggests the Mughal ruler would present himself as a prophet equivalent to Jesus. The figural juxtaposition foregrounds qualities, merits, and righteousness between the biblical-Quranic figures and the representatives of the Mughal Empire, but strictly respects the ontological limitations imposed by the Islamic conception of mankind, prophethood, and divine appointment.

The second scenario, previously alluded to, presents Christian figures as part of a sophisticated, exotic decorum used to frame the imperial image. Their inclusion in the pictorial theatrics was meant to glorify the Mughal monarch,

and thus would have emptied these icons of their Christian meaning, while taking advantage of their purely perceptual qualities. This view eludes the issue of Christian-Islamic negotiation at the heart of this Mughal imagery's semantic. It narrowly relies on evidence of Mughal resistance to Christian proselytism and a certain impact Islam seems to have had on Christian guests at the Mughal court as hinted at in period sources. For example, at a Jahangiri *Ibadatkhana's* session, one of these guests cried out, "While they do not believe in our books, we believe in theirs."<sup>64</sup> Still, this does not imply that the Mughals, in appropriating Christian iconography for their pictorial projects, had discarded Christian symbolism or "recycled it" for completely different purposes.

If Gauvin Bailey's theories of representation introduce nuances in this reductive interpretation, they nevertheless minimize the Mughal interest for the subjects' Christian ipseity. In a characteristically sweeping statement, Bailey declares, "The answer is simple: they [the Mughals] did not necessarily perceive the images as Christian. They interpreted missionary art on their own terms and used images of Christian saints and angels to proclaim a message based on Islamic, Sufi and Hindu symbolism and linked with Persian poetic metaphor."<sup>65</sup>

Needless to say the answer is far from simple, and indiscriminately pouring all these symbols and meanings together into the same Mughal-Christian pot does not much help elucidate the enigma. What can be retained from this assertion is the logical idea that the projection of these Islamic, Sufi, Hindu, and poetic meanings would certainly partake of the multiple phenomenological effects that this cross-religious imagery may have had on the mind of the cosmopolitan viewers. In other words, given the hybrid nature of both the works and their audience, it is safe to talk about the former as connoted images endowed with the capacity of triggering religious-cultural resonances and echoes, greatly diversified. Yet the capacity of these images to prompt a variety of responses due the hybrid milieu in which they were seen does not signify that they did not possess a fixed elaborate intrinsic meaning; that is the meaning given to these images at their creation constituted independently of the load of external significances this complex viewing process may have added to it.

As to the remark about the Mughal's lack of understanding of the Christian material, it seems to me inaccurate. For example, when in a portrait Jahangir appears side by side with Jesus holding a cross or any other unaltered openly Christian iconography, one cannot reasonably claim that its symbolism had been ignored just because of the dissonance it ostensibly engenders. In addition, this particular picture of Jahangir paired with a young Christ brandishing the symbol of crucifixion deconstructs in strong terms the theory of a representational linkage between the different figures of the Christian-Mughal imagery (Fig. 42). Jahangir would have neither endorsed the story

of Jesus' crucifixion, which is contested in the Qur'an, nor would he have imagined a projection of himself in the form of a Christic icon.

*THE CHRISTIAN ICONS' IPSEITY AS AN ELEMENT OF THE MUGHAL-ISLAMIC IMAGISTIC DISCOURSE*

According to our interpretation, this apparent dissonance of the Christian-Mughal imagistic pairing is not simply a consequence of the aesthetic strategy of art borrowing but also constitutes an element essential to the Mughal artworks' discourse or message. The Christian iconography was perceived in full awareness of its Christian ipseity by the works' commissioner at least in the complex chain of Mughal art making, and purposely incorporated into the imperial portrait to convey a Christian meaning. Acceptance does not mean endorsement, embracement, or approval. The Mughals accepted the icons' Christianity exactly like the Renaissance image-makers and patrons accepted the pagan imagery of Antiquity as a conveyor of pagan meanings, apart from any further act of fusion or negotiation between the two cultural-philosophical systems.

Indeed, Mughal imperial portraiture, as with the Renaissance Christian-Pagan imagistic construct resting upon recognizable pagan forms, displays perceptually unaltered Christian icons and allows the Christic *semiosis* to freely operate in its midst. In both cases this visibility of the figurations' semantic and formal attributes a fortiori preserves in substance their original capital of meaning, although in the new pictorial context this capital has been augmented by the addition of new significations. European humanist and aesthetic literature has largely contributed to the understanding of these Renaissance pictorial compositions, but in the absence of equivalent explanatory material in the Mughal context, the critical task falls to a semiotic and phenomenological analysis of the artworks.

First, the combination of this accepted Christian imagery with the imperial icon is only apparently paradoxical. The conspicuous presence of this imagery in the Mughal image's highly symbolic aesthetic space is objectively declarative of a fundamental fact: the double Christian-Muslim ipseity of the figures of Jesus, Mary, and the angels. This fact declared in forms certainly can only express one thing: the Mughal humanist attitude toward Christianity. The latter faith was primarily and positively apprehended as the generic antecedent of Islam in the sacred historical perspective of the tripartite sequential Revelation ultimately sealed with Muhammad's bringing of the Qur'an. The transcultural climate at the Mughal court had informed and stimulated this attitude and prehension of the second (chronologically) monotheism. If the Christian cultural force did not achieve its proselyte goal, it certainly impacted Mughal humanism by reminding Mughals of the role of the "People of the Book" (Jews and Christians) in the long history of monotheism.

The paintings clearly manifest this Mughal humanist phenomenon of the revalorization of continuity between Islam and Christianity despite their doctrinal divergences.

This Mughal conceptualization of the two faiths' continuity erects in the pictures the necessary framework to allow the dualistic connections between the different figures to be semantically effective. On one hand, the icons' intact Christian look not only tells but also emphatically recalls the Christian narrative of Jesus, Mary, and the angels; on the other hand, the figure of the emperor, the representation's dominant meaning-producer, dictates the Islamic order of things in a silent proclamation. According to this order, enunciated in the Qur'an, the Christian narrative is incomplete and deviant:

O People of the Book, do not exaggerate in your religion, and do not say about God anything but the truth. The Messiah, Jesus, Mary's son, is only God's messenger, and His Word He imparted to Mary, and a Spirit from Him. Believe in God and in His messengers, and do not say, "Three." Stop it! It is better for you. God is but a single God; He is too exalted for anything to become a son to Him, anything in the heavens or anything on earth. God suffices as a guardian. (*Surat an-Nisa*, "The Women," 4: 171)<sup>66</sup>

Consequently, the Christian icons' double ipseity acquired in the Mughal imagistic context constitutes a fundamental component of what I think must be understood as a religious commentary on the Christian-Muslim linkage by the supreme living Islamic authority on earth, the Mughal ruler. This commentary consists of an assertion both conjunctive and disjunctive, as it stipulates at the same time the historic inseparability of the two faiths through their convergence (that is, their spiritual conjunctivity) and the founding claim about Islam as the true religion through their divergences (that is, their doctrinal disjunctivity). But then one may wonder why the Mughals had the need to make this imagistic predicament so prominent and emblematic of Mughal imperial visibility.

Not that the dynasty felt the urge to justify their Islamic position vis-à-vis Christianity, as there was no real power struggle between the representatives of the two religions in these times. Yet, the Christian-Mughal imperial portrait can be seen as a response to the Christian intellectual stimuli or a reaction to the Christian cultural impression in the sense that the latter incited the Muslim monarchs to retake possession of this licit spiritual heritage and thereby to widen their own religious-cultural history and metaphysical scope. In a world—the Mughal world—where, in parallel with speech and writing, ideas and concepts were to the extent possible communicated through visibility and transfigured in images and bodies, it then appears natural that this revalorization of monotheistic history had concrete repercussions in Mughal art, conceived as a visual mode of discourse, and found a way to express itself in the language of forms.

Moreover, if one further reflects, all the actors and agencies from the diverse cultural strata of the Mughal Empire, ascetics, saints, monks, and sages of variegated sensibilities and faiths, were figured in the Mughal visual landscape and thereby participated in this discourse. But it makes sense that only monotheistic iconic figures could be so intimately and visibly coupled with the empire's Muslim sovereign in the most important symbolic site, the imperial portrait itself. Therefore, I contend that the Christian-Mughal figurations involving the emperor constitute Islamic figural constructs, in the full religious sense of the word "Islamic."

### Hybrid No More

Oleg Grabar once said, "it is indeed true that all sorts of technical devices of European origin were incorporated into the canvas of traditional Iranicate Mughal painting and that many of them were woven so artfully that they no longer appear as artificial borrowings but as integral parts of the language used by the painters. These are not hybrid paintings, but learned compositions in which very different artifices were used to make visual effects."<sup>67</sup>

I situate this process of full incorporation of foreign forms, which enables the ontological slippage from hybridity to non-hybridity, during the period of Shah Jahan. This monarch and his artists made creative use of the borrowed aesthetic strategies and plastic repertoires that his father, Jahangir, brought forth in Mughal pictorial practice. This appropriated artistic material was therefore already internalized and processed during the Shahjahani era, for which the topic of hybridity is indeed no longer relevant. Consequently, Shahjahani painting is a non-hybrid artistic production, and should be investigated as such in another book.

### Notes

- 1 An example of a thorough work on these iconographic adaptations is Ebba Koch, "The Mughal Emperor as Solomon, Majnun, and Orpheus, or, The Album as Think Tank for Allegory," *Muqarnas Online* 27, 1 (2011): 277–311. As far as interpretation is concerned, in Chapter 2 I have exposed the contradictory views and subjective projections on the subject. To get a sense of the tensions and debates regarding this convergence, see the reviews of Ebba Koch's book, *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, by Som Prakash Verma, *Journal of Islamic Studies* 14, 3 (2003): 402–6; B.N. Goswamy, "Seeking Orpheus in Agra," *India Today* (July 23, 2001), <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/book-review-mughal-art-and-imperial-ideology-author-ebba-koch/1/230775.html>; Monica Juneja, *Studies in History* 19, 2 (August 2003): 282–87; and Sheila Blair, *CAA.Reviews*, September 3, 2002, [www.caareviews.org/reviews/418](http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/418).

- 2 Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 133.
- 3 The basic history of Mughal portraiture can be found in the numerous exhibition catalogs and general books on Mughal painting cited at the beginning of this book. Among them, see the catalog of the exhibition in London, *The Indian Portrait*, in particular the section written by Susan Stronge, "Portraiture at the Mughal Court," 23–31.
- 4 In *A Mirror of Princes: The Mughals and the Medici*, 8. Monica Juneja and other scholars have made similar remarks.
- 5 This expression repeats the title of a collection of essays, *Idol Anxiety* (op. cit.) in which Mika Natif provides a clear exposé of the issue in Islam, in "The Painter's Breath and Concepts of Idol Anxiety in Islamic Art." See also Jamal J. Elias, *Aisha's Cushion: Religious Art, Perception and Practice in Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012). This book also analyzes the current issue of human figuration in Islam, notably after the Danish cartoon crisis.
- 6 Pratapaditya Pal, introduction to *Master Artists of the Imperial Mughal Court*, ed. Pratapaditya Pal (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 1991), vii. Here is another translation of the same widely quoted reflection by Akbar, reported by his biographer: "There are many that hate painting; but such men I dislike. It appears to me as if a painter had quite peculiar means of recognizing God; for a painter in sketching anything that has life, and in devising its limbs, one after the other, must come to feel that he cannot bestow individuality upon his work, and is thus forced to think of God, the giver of life, and will thus increase in knowledge." Abu'l-Fazl Allami, *A'in-I Akbari*, 115.
- 7 These works previously cited include "Tracing the History of a Mughal Album Page in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art" and "The Earliest Datable Mughal Painting."
- 8 Quoted from the abstract Parodi provided for the conference on *Portraiture in South Asia*, Centre of South Asian Studies, School of African and Oriental Studies, London, May 21–22, 2010. The publication associated with this event is the catalog of the exhibition *The Indian Portrait*, but it does not contain all of the participants' papers.
- 9 This point was discussed in Chapter 3.
- 10 It is worth noting that both types of image belong to the category I call "the apparent portrait" in Chapter 1.
- 11 See Laura E. Parodi and Bruce Wannell, "The Earliest Datable Mughal Painting."
- 12 See my analysis of the *Shahnama* as tool of kingly self-representation, in the critique of Kishwar Rizvi's article on Shah 'Abbas' suggestive portrait (Chapter 1).
- 13 The Mughal political thought and conception of sovereignty are complex matters that evolved over time on the basis of inherited Central Asian and Persian traditions combined with new philosophical elaborations produced by the emperor's scholarly entourage, notably Akbar's intellectual partners, the chronicler Abu'l-Fazl and his brother poet-laureate Faizi, who famously produced new theories of kingship and descriptions of the imperial persona.

For example, in his eulogistic *rubaiyat* (quatrains) about Akbar Faizi wrote, “He is a king on account of his wisdom, we call zuf unun (possessor of the sciences) and our guide on the path of religion . . . . Although kings are the shadow of god on earth, he is the emanation of god’s light. How then can we call him a shadow?” See Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi’ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890*, chapter 3: “The Shadow of God on Earth: The Ethos of Persian Patrimonialism” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 85–100; Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics*, and edited by these authors, *The Mughal State, 1526–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); S.A.A. Rizvi, *Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar’s Reign, with Special Reference to Abu’l Fazl* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1975); Catherine B. Asher, “A Ray from the Sun: Mughal Ideology and the Visual Construction of the Divine,” in *The Presence of Light: Divine Radiance and Religious Experience*, ed. Matthew T. Kapstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 161–94.

- 14 This discussion is correlated to my analysis of Kishwar Rizvi’s article on “The suggestive portrait of Shah ‘Abbas” in Chapter 1.
- 15 See Susan Stronge’s article in *The Indian Portrait*.
- 16 Abu’l-Fazl Allami, *Ain-I Akbari*, 3, quoted in William J. Duiker, Jackson J. Spielvogel, *World History*, vol. II, *Since 1500* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012), 467. See also Catherine B. Asher, “A Ray from the Sun”; A. Azfar Moin, “Peering through the Cracks in the Baburnama: The Textured Lives of Mughal Sovereigns,” *Indian Economic Social History Review* 49, 4 (October–December 2012): 493–526.
- 17 The portraits of Akbar made under his patronage are to be distinguished from those commissioned by his successors, which display the visual attributes they applied to themselves.
- 18 These are well-known facts amply discussed in the literature on Mughal political thought and the Mughal State, from which I have provided some references.
- 19 See Andrew Topsfield, *Paintings from Mughal India*, 13–14.
- 20 See *Ibid.*, 18–19.
- 21 Amina Okada uses these expressions in *Imperial Mughal Painters*, 23–4. Another example is Sanjay Subrahmanyam, who talked about a playful use and recycling of European imagery by the Mughals in a lecture at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2011.
- 22 This aspect of Mughal art unfortunately could not be examined in this book, but it should definitely be revisited with up-to-date hermeneutic techniques.
- 23 It should be noted that the numerous portraits of Akbar included in Jahangiri painting are based on models of his likeness made during his lifetime that are in the quarter-view format. In Akbar’s period, as recalled before, the profile did not yet form the aesthetic imperial canon it became under Jahangir’s sponsorship. Moreover, to depict historic people from the past, the artists used a traditional prototype of three-quarter view as they could not obtain or invent the physiognomic scheme of their profile.

- 24 In relation to this topic, see Valerie Gonzalez, "Confronting Images: Jahangir Versus King James I."
- 25 Ebba Koch, *King of the World*, 134–5.
- 26 See these various interpretations about the presentation of the body in Mughal visuality: Monica Juneja, "Translating the Body into Image. The Body Politic and Visual Practice at the Mughal Court during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries"; Gülru Necipoğlu, "Framing the Gaze in Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal Palaces," *Ars Orientalis* 23 (1993): 303–42, and this author's comparative study, "The Serial Portraits of Ottoman Sultans in Comparative Perspective"; Robert R. Skelton, "Imperial Symbolism in Mughal Painting," in *Content and Context of Visual Arts in the Islamic World*, 177–92. As to Ebba Koch's studies cited several times, I have expressed my strong disagreement concerning the interpretation of the profile view.
- 27 On this painting see Richard Ettinghausen, "The Emperor's Choice," *De Artibus Opuscula* XL (1961): 98–122, and Valerie Gonzalez, "Confronting Images: Jahangir Versus King James I."
- 28 In my article "Confronting Images" I analyze the contradictory phenomenology of the gaze provoked by the conjunction, within one and the same painting, of the copy of a full-face portrait of King James with Mughal profiled and three-quarter likenesses.
- 29 It is worth remarking that in Persian painting one may also find figures looking at the picture's outer space. Yet this phenomenon does not occur systematically as in Mughal painting; therefore, it does not change the nature of the image, which is definitely non-imitative. What this feature reveals, on the other hand, is the Persian painter's awareness of the gaze as key performative device in image making in general. The utterly selective and sporadic insertion of this device in Persian painting can be understood as a non-compromising *clin d'oeil* to mimetic art, a subtle claim of awareness.
- 30 Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Tome II (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 95. Hubert Damisch quotes Benveniste in "La peinture prise au mot," 22. The English translation is my own from the original text: "Le visage de profil est détaché de l'observateur et appartient, avec le corps en action (ou inerte et sans but), à un espace que les autres profils partagent sur la surface de l'image. Il correspond approximativement à la forme grammaticale de la troisième personne: le pronom 'il' ou 'elle,' non spécifié, suivi de la forme verbale correspondante; au lieu que le visage tourné vers l'extérieur paraît animé d'une intention, d'un regard latent ou potentiel dirigé vers le spectateur, et correspond au rôle du 'je' dans le langage, associé au 'tu' qui en est le complément obligé."
- 31 The English translation of the original French text is my own: "*Deux profils d'homme dont la clarté t'aurait bouleversée*," Agustin Gomez-Arcos, *L'agneau carnivore* (Paris: Stock, 1975), 317. This exiled Spanish writer indeed wrote in the language of his host country, France. Trans. William Rodarmor, *The Carnivorous Lamb* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007).
- 32 Doris Lessing, *The Cleft* (London; New York; Toronto; Sydney: Harper Perennial, 2008), 102.

- 33 See again Catherine B. Asher, "A Ray from the Sun," and Monica Juneja, "Translating the Body into Image."
- 34 The billowing clouds with angels, putti, and heavenly crowns borrowed from the European vocabulary partake of these signs. See Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*. In this book Damisch quotes Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, "Covered by cloud, to show that divine things are hidden from the human face" (*Coperto di nebia a dimostrare che nel viso humano son le cose divine occulte*), 23, and about Correggio's paintings he explains, "It was cloud that made it possible to introduce the sign of divine presence (in the form of few *putti* or little angels) into a composition organized according to the principles of perspective, or to lift an enthroned Virgin or an amorous nymph out of ordinary space," 19.
- 35 Catherine B. Asher underscores the great appeal the aesthetic of light in Mughal painting could have exerted on the empire's Hindu subjects, in her article "A Ray from the Sun."
- 36 See Ebba Koch, "The Mughal Emperor as Solomon, Majnun, and Orpheus." She and other scholars talk about "representations" of the Mughal emperor as Orpheus, Majnun, or Solomon.
- 37 *Tuzuk-I Jahangiri* (Jahangir's autobiography), 32.
- 38 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 82. Joyce provides two versions of the same definition and they are both written in italic in his text.
- 39 The term "humanist" here refers generically to the cultivation of humanistic disciplines in their ambiguous yet interactive linkage with religion. Alongside the volume, *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective*, see Monica Juneja, "Mission, Encounters and Transnational History: Reflections on the Use of Concepts across Cultures," in *Halle and the Beginnings of Protestant Christianity in India*, ed. Andreas Gross, and Yves Vincent Kumaradoss and Heike Liebau, 3 vols. (Halle: Franckesche Stiftungen, 2006), III, 1025–46.
- 40 Gauvin A. Bailey, "Occasional Papers: The Jesuits and the Grand Mogul," 10–11. See also this overview of intellectual culture at Akbar's court by Ebba Koch, "The Intellectual and Artistic Climate at Akbar's Court," in *The Adventures of Hamza: Painting and Storytelling in Mughal India*, exhibition catalog, ed. John Seyller (London: Azimuth Editions; Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2002), 18–31.
- 41 Excerpt from the advertisement of *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective, Experiences and Expectations*, ed. Jörn Rüsen and Henner Laass (Berlin, Munster; Wien; Zurich; London: Verlag Transcript, 2009; New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), [www.transcript-verlag.de/.../5b78c13ad1f87b9c9f5247d960757eb3.pdf](http://www.transcript-verlag.de/.../5b78c13ad1f87b9c9f5247d960757eb3.pdf):
- "This book is a breakthrough in illuminating humanism. For the first time it is presented in an intercultural perspective. It introduces Chinese, Indian, African, Islamic, and Western traditions into the intercultural discussion about basic issues of understanding the human world. By this means it recognizes different disciplinary perspectives: history, philosophy as well as religious, literary and gender studies. Special emphasis is put on the controversial relationship between humanism and religion. This complex network of argumentations is

an answer to the challenge of cultural orientation at the age of globalization. Humanism is brought to life as a synthesis of transcultural values and a mutual and critical recognition of cultural differences."

- 42 *The Renaissance and the Ottoman World*, ed. Anna Contadini and Claire Norton (Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013).
- 43 Gauvin Bailey's words in "Occasional Papers," 13. Som Prakash Verma's most recent works have the merit to highlight the existence of this Mughal-European intellectual convergence, but they problematically interpret its nature and content as the methodology used is outdated. In particular, Verma promotes a segregative and reductive definition of the adjective "Indian." See Som Prakash Verma, *Interpreting Mughal Painting: Essays on Art, Society and Culture*, Oxford Collected Essays (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), Monica Juneja's review underscores its valuable findings but also deconstructs Verma's arguable views. Verma's many ideas are further developed with similar methodology in his latest release, *Biblical Themes in Mughal Painting: Crossing Cultural Frontiers* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2011).
- 44 See Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, "Religious Disputations and Imperial Ideology: The Purpose and Location of Akbar's *Ibadatkhana*," *Studies in History* 24, 2 (2008): 195–209.
- 45 This event is mentioned in Chapter 1.
- 46 *A Mirror of Princes*, 8. Let us recall that this vision of civilizational mirroring is opposed to the view that early Modern Mughal culture remained in substance under the Persian orbit; therefore, it presents only superficial connectedness with Europe. The partisans of this view reduce the cultural intercourse between Renaissance Europe and Mughal India to the latter's pragmatic borrowing of Western artistic forms and techniques without much implication at the level of meaning and philosophy.
- 47 This idea of a Mughal change of attitude toward Nature also underpins another *Marg* issue previously cited, *Flora and Fauna in Mughal Art*.
- 48 On Florentine humanist thought, see, for example, Charles G. Nauert Jr., *Humanism and the Culture of Renaissance Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 49 Clearly, there are no negative connotations in "brute" and "savage" enhancing the directedness of the seeing process. The latter term "savage" refers more precisely to André Breton, who said "the eye exists in a savage state," quoted by Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes*, 565.
- 50 About the Scholastics and art, see the exhaustive and still unequalled study by Edgar De Bruyne, *Etudes d'esthétique médiévale*, vols. 1 and 2 (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998).
- 51 This is my way of putting it, as I am aware of the debates around this question of secularism and religion in Renaissance humanism.
- 52 This is the expression Martin Jay uses to concisely describe human representation in early Modern Europe in *Downcast Eyes*, 404.
- 53 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 405.

- 54 Quoted by Seyed Ali Nadeem Rezavi in “Religious Disputations and Imperial Ideology,” 196.
- 55 See *Sufism in Punjab: Mystics, Literature and Shrines*, ed. Surinder Singh and Ishwar Dayal Gaur (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2009); Sayid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2009).
- 56 See *Humanism in Intercultural Perspective: Experiences and Expectations*, part I “The Challenge of Globalization.”
- 57 Seyed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, “Religious Disputations and Imperial Ideology,” 195.
- 58 In early Modern Mughal India as in Renaissance Florence, this program crowns a series of determining precedents: on one hand is the Mongol and pre-Mughal Sultanate tradition of multifaith and multicultural cultivations and accommodations, and on the other is the Renascences before the Renaissance, as Erwin Panofsky famously coined these precedents in Western culture in, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1972).
- 59 Ebba Koch quotes Akbar in *Mughal Art and Imperial Ideology*, 1. She refers to E. Rehatseck, “The Letter of the Emperor Akbar Asking for the Christian Scriptures,” *Indian Antiquary* XVI (1887): 135–9.
- 60 For example, the Peter Greenaway film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), or Claude Sautet’s *Vincent, François, Paul ... et les autres* (1974).
- 61 Gauvin A. Bailey, *Occasional Papers*, 37. See also Ebba Koch, “The Influence of Jesuit Missions on Symbolic Representations of the Mughal Emperor,” in *Islam in India*, ed. Christian Troll (New Delhi: Manohar, 1982), 1–27.
- 62 For instance, Jahangir’s breath is compared to Jesus’ breath, a popular poetic topic in Mughal and Persian literature. See Gauvin A. Bailey, *Occasional Papers*, 35, and Ebba Koch, “The Influence of Jesuit Missions on Symbolic Representations of the Mughal Emperor,” 27. This phenomenon of association between Jesus and Mary and the Mughal emperor is well evidenced in the studies in general.
- 63 Gauvin A. Bailey, *Occasional Papers*, 35, and see also 48.
- 64 Quote reported by Alam and Subrahmanyam, “Frank Disputations,” 486.
- 65 Gauvin A. Bailey, *Occasional Papers*, 35.
- 66 See Sydney H. Griffith, “The Eastern Christians and the Muslims: The Past as Prelude to the Present,” *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 7, 2 (Autumn–Winter 2005): 225–41. Griffith quotes Qur’an 4:171, in 226.
- 67 Oleg Grabar, *Islamic Visual Culture, 1100–1800: Constructing the Study of Islamic Art* (Aldershot, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006), 255.

## Conclusion

A work of art is not written information.

Andre Masson, *A Crisis of the Imaginary*, 1944

A picture does two things: it proposes how to see the world and what to see in it. That is the premise from which the subject of this book has been approached. In Mughal art as in its European or Chinese counterparts, painting is neither “written information,” to reiterate the complaint of the twentieth-century French painter Andre Masson, nor simply an object of collection, a cultural signifier, or a historical testimony, but rather an elaborate product of thought and visual creation otherwise termed “aesthetic object.” My goal was to illuminate this status and function of painting in early Modern Mughal culture, to unravel its true ontology born of a subtly modulated transitive relationship between three distinct aesthetic metaphysics, that of Persian, Indo-Sultanate, and European pictorialities. I have argued the latter was an external newcomer of much lesser impact, albeit significant.

With the traditionalist protocol of the scholarship on pictorial art in Islam as backdrop, such a project could not be carried out straightforwardly. The substantial Part I had not only to deconstruct the sheer load of resistances, pitfalls, and shortcomings in the studies but also to redefine a more adequate methodology in accordance with contemporary epistemic acquisitions in the broad discipline of art history.

### The Necessary Prolegomena

It has taken two chapters to sort out the variegated epistemological issues the aesthetic-critical methodology raises in the field of Islamic art history and to build the theoretical support indispensable for preparing the ground for the discussions in Part II. The miscellaneous negative attitudes toward a frankly interdisciplinary approach to Islamic art—the ethnocentric affects, subjective

projections, and unpreparedness concerning the critical tools—had to be surveyed and critiqued for a fresh start. I believe this assessment has given a fair sense of the magnitude of the obstacles to be overcome and the dire need to update art historical practice as applied to painting in Islam. In addition, beyond these immediate necessities, these lengthy exposés have ultimately brought forth the opportunity to open doors and pave the way for future research in this direction. Critical projects on Islamic artistic creation ought now to be exempt from the same florilegium of theoretical reflections and epistemological justifications. I would certainly consider it an achievement to stimulate some form of follow up.

In particular, it has been observed how phenomenology brings the practitioner of this method closer to the artwork as an autonomous object of cognition, allowing a deeper comprehension of its visual language and enabling one to discern and segregate with the utmost precision the different perceptive and cognitional levels of the beholder's experience. Phenomenology has also shown how to look at details and detect problems, and has aroused significant interrogations that usually escape the traditional art historian's attention, as in the case of the Persian album discussed in Chapter 2. This method has highlighted the decisive importance of investigating the double phenomenology of the sum and the parts and the double structure of beholding it induces. Such analysis gives access to the multiplicity of meanings that stratified artistic media like albums segmentally release. Although my collaboration with Bissera Pentcheva has recently helped boost interest in phenomenology in Byzantine art studies, the field of Islamic art history still awaits similar initiative.

### **A Journey through Mughal Hybrid Pictoriality**

This book has underlined that Early Modern Mughal painting reflects the centuries-old Indian philosophy of cultural hybridism. It navigated the complex series of hybridizations between the three main artistic currents that engendered this art, the local pre-Modern Sultanate legacy, the Persian late Timurid and Safavid imports, and the European influx of illustrated books, prints, and paintings. In the existing studies, the exact terms of this intertwinement of creative forces and their specific contribution and impact in the Mughal imagistic elaboration were the subject of different interpretations that I have shown comprise lacunas and deliver too many inconsistencies. More specifically, the decisive role of Sultanate book art had been conspicuously underestimated. My reading of the artworks and the artistic events that informed them allowed me to offer new findings and alternative conclusions.

*THE BEGINNINGS OF MUGHAL PAINTING: RECHRONICLING THE EVENTS IN AGRA, TABRIZ, AND KABUL (1526–54)*

The journey began with a return to the dawn of the Mughal Empire in order to look for the antecedents that nurtured the creation of Mughal painting that developed under Akbar's patronage. Scholars have coped with the archaeological vacuum between 1526 and 1556 by abiding by the existing material and tightly following the dynasty's early history. Therefore, it has been widely assumed that it is the Persian art transferred to the subcontinent upon Humayun's return to Northern India in 1555 that gave rise to Mughal painting. The objective facts of Humayun's sponsoring of paintings in Kabul during his decade-long stay there, of his encounter with Safavid art in Iran, and of the Persian painters he brought to the Indo-Mughal court afterwards, form the keystone of this interpretive scheme positioning India as the receptor of an art born elsewhere and called in the historiography "Mughal painting." This import would then have absorbed local pictorial conventions and patterns that led to the formation of a distinct "Mughal" school in the subcontinent, defined by its Indianized style.

I took issue with this interpretation because it ignores the pre-exile period of the Mughal Empire in India and the following years of the Afghan usurper's rule before Humayun's repatriation, during which pictorial developments must have occurred, although no Indo-Mughal artifact locally produced proves it. Yet, given that the Mughal artistic patronage was always active and that the Suri episode did not necessarily mean cessation of creation, it has seemed to me legitimate to compensate for the archaeological vacuum by imagining that a cross-cultural form of painting could have come into existence during this early period.

With this presupposition as backdrop, I have presented my refutation of the Mughal identity of Humayuni painting made in Kabul. In aesthetic terms, this production out of Mughal India falls into the separate category of Afghan-Persian art, except for the representation of the Mughal princes painstakingly unraveled in excellent recent works. Comparing this case with Rubens's famous pictorial cycle representing Marie de' Medici and Henri IV, I have argued that one cannot qualify and define an art based on the sole identity of the patron or figures in the images. The Humayuni commissions are no more Mughal paintings than Rubens's aforementioned works are the product of French art. The unusual iconographic content in the former, results from what I have called "the inflexion" of the Persian Kabuli pictorial conventions by the Mughal patron made to suit his aesthetic vision and interests. This subtle but highly significant process consisted of the signaletic encoding of the images in order to represent the Mughal family and depict actual events involving them, while not changing the local picturing modalities that ignored the royal portrait genre. These observations in sum invalidate, in the critical-aesthetic

discourse, the consensual positing of the terminological equivalency between “Mughal” and “Timurid,” valid in the historical discourse. Only hybrid Indo-Mughal painting fits the definition “Mughal,” thus precisely understood as “Indo-Timurid” in contradistinction with “Persian-Timurid.”

My stance on this differential relationship between the arts in Afghanistan and Hindustan under Mughal patronage has induced the displacement of the inception of Mughal painting from Kabul to Northern India. I indeed have hypothesized that Humayun acquired in India the idea of portraying in images the reality of the dynastic life and people, and that one must place the focus on the pre-Mughal Sultanate legacy in the development of Mughal painting to understand what made it aesthetically “Mughal.”

*ABOUT SULTANATE BOOK ART IN THE GENESIS OF MUGHAL PAINTING*

A closer look at pre-Mughal Sultanate painting and manuscript culture unraveled their founding role and multifaceted contribution in the genesis of Mughal pictorial art. A detailed examination of this art’s innovating aspects and pivotal concepts uncovered the richness of the pre-Mughal Sultanate legacy beyond the stylistic formulas, iconography, and patterns pointed out by scholars.

Little had been said of the determining fact that the philosophy and practice of artistic hybridization in Mughal culture came from the Sultanates, and that the latter are to be credited for having valorized hybridism as both of high aesthetic-cultural value and a privileged parameter of creation. I have tried to fill this blank in the historiography by showing how, at the end of transformational processes sustained by shifts in the pictorial practice and productivity, the eclecticism characteristic of the Sultanate pictorial aesthetic became syncretism in Mughal art.

The second major Sultanate contribution was the vitalistic conception of representation as coextensive to Nature and the anthropocentric imagery that laid down the conceptual foundations upon which the Mughals would construct their pictorial metaphysics, centered on human figuration and anchored in the empirical here and now. The powerful phenomenality of figures of bodies in Sultanate painting was the motor of this dynamic of transmission that I also explained by correlating it to a broader fact of culture specific to the subcontinent—namely, the Indic tandem body-cultural matrix and ocularcentrism. This fact of culture, in my opinion, was determinative in shaping the Mughal aesthetic consciousness and artistic vision, as was the case in pre-Modern times for peoples who came to India from the logocentric cultures of the Arabo-Persianate world.

For this reason, it has seemed to me plausible that in the pre-exile period of the Mughal reign, an Indo-Persianate hybrid imagery already had been formed, bearing the signs of the Indian aesthetic mimesis and double pattern

of ocularcentrism and body-centrism. Nonetheless, the phenomenon appears evidenced after 1555, although the signaleptic portrait of Humayun's family in Kabuli art already offers a hint at its workings and effects in the Mughal psyche before this period.

*THE RE-PERSIANIZATION OF MUGHAL PAINTING AFTER THE 1555 RESTORATION*

Two waves of re-Persianization of Indian painting that occurred with the Mughal advent in 1526 and upon Humayun's return from exile in 1555 brought about new plastic models, techniques, designs, and forms. After the latter date, the rich Safavid material shaped a spectacular aesthetic paradigm of imperial dimension posited as the muse of the *kitabkhana's* artists. But as inspiring as they were, those imports did not signify a simple implantation of Persian art in the subcontinent. Akbari painting is the product of a double creative process of retention and deconstruction that, although clearly cognizable, had been heretofore poorly explained. One of the challenges that unraveling this complex double process posed early on was the lack of proper critical-aesthetic studies on Persian painting upon which to rely. Chapter 4 has attempted to compensate this void, but clearly the subject remains an exciting, open field for research.

As argued in a series of detailed essays on the Persian pictorial aesthetic, owing to its scriptural structural properties and linguistic workings, the Persian picture functions *like* and *as* a text written with a non-alphabetical, clearly figural, coding system akin to sematography. Its pictoriality operates in the imaginary world of poetics and addresses the viewer's imagining consciousness, just like most of the writings it transposes and portrays in perceptual forms. It has been précised, however, that this internalized poetic mode of seeing mundane reality did not prevent the Persian artists from offering glimpses of contemporary life. Vignettes depicting daily activities are incorporated like incursions of the real into the Persian picture's scriptural and poetic world.

It is hoped this study of Persian painting has provided new insights and has helped disclose the deep differential relation between Persian and Mughal production, in sorting out the variegated aesthetic operations that entailed this difference of ontological nature. In summary, here is my narrative about the Persian-Mughal pictorial chiasm.

The idealistic aesthetic of Persian pictoriality reached new heights of surreal quality in the first half of the sixteenth century. It exerted enough appeal and fascination to set a prevalent fashion at Akbar's *kitabkhana*, but also opposed too profoundly the more rational Indo-Mughal vision of art to not provoke decisive transformational interventions. Entrancingly phenomenal, optically gripping, and historically resonating, yet growing more and more incompatible with the distinct Indo-Mughal imaging sense, the late

Timurid-Safavid plasticity irradiated and exemplified at Akbar's court and *kitabkhana*, but did not impede the inexorable process of its detextualization and rationalization: the Persian picture served but did not govern Akbari pictoriality, already quintessentially mimetic.

I exposed the variegated Mughal strategies that were deployed to turn the scriptural space of the Persian linguistic-chirographic pictoriality into a mimetic iconic space and transform its imaginary imagery into tableaux projectors of the mundane, yet retaining a great deal of the Persian design elements and perceptual qualities. Owing to this double feature of retention and deconstruction, plainly this hybrid Akbari painting does not fit the conventional scheme of imitative figurality if one abides by the criteria of classical European art history. The combination of space-creative devices and imitative repertoires with the Persian idealistic forms and flamboyant aesthetic engendered the characteristically hyperdialectic Mughal aesthetic observable for the first time in Akbari imperial works. These pictures mixing plastic three-dimensionality with two-dimensionality and mirroring Nature, while exuding the surreal lyricism of Persian pictoriality, carry the essential visual concepts of Mughal imagistic language after which Jahangiri and Shahjahani developed.

It has been my contention that these complex artistic operations based on the manipulation of the Persian paragons and pre-Mughal Sultanate book art were underpinned by the shift of artistic vision and cultural optics the Mughals went through upon their immersion in the Indian visual landscape shaped by the Indic metaphysics of the body. At the background of this shifting process is indeed the Indic cultural space inhabited by infinitely conjugated bodies, in which since time immemorial social practices and religious rituals involved intense corporeal activities and bodily acts of fundamental metaphysical significance such as dance. In this environment, the body assumed the double function of logos and cultural matrix so that the scopic regime was institutionalized as the most important Indian mode of cultural cognitivity and communication.

Originally formed by a logocentric Islamic-Persianate culture, the Mughals' aesthetic consciousness, like that of the Muslims who had settled in India before them, inevitably received the penetrating waves of this Indic cultural carnality and ocularcentrism whereby, noticeably, the Islamic pattern of idol anxiety became subdued despite the resistance of religious authorities. As a result, in the Indo-Mughal Muslim context, figuring the real not only could be considered a legitimate act, it also became a desire and a *habitus*. In sum, I believe that the Mughals' experience of the body-centric Indic visuality was a determining factor in the process of rationalization that engendered the Mughal pictorial metaphysics characterized by a certain aesthetic positivism. The phenomenon yielded to the rise of a unique Islamic imagery of the body,

physiognomically and lively represented like never and nowhere else before in the Islamic sphere.

*SITUATING THE EUROPEAN ELEMENT IN THE DYNAMIC OF MUGHAL PICTORIAL  
HYBRIDIZATIONS*

By shedding light on the essential Indo-Persian components of the Mughal pictorial idiom, finally one can better grasp the nature of the European contribution and identify it, not as a foundational generative element, but as a supplemental force in the development of early Modern Mughal painting. If this alien artistic influx had nothing to do with the Mughal image construction based on the Indo-Persian aesthetic intersection, it certainly participated in a dimensional way in its evolution by offering a reservoir of forms and techniques as well as new aesthetic stimuli and impulses. The Mughal favorable reception, appreciation, and integration of this art from the West was encouraged, again not by any influential power the Europeans might have exerted on the Mughal psyche, but by significant conceptual affinities between the hosts' and guests' aesthetic cultures.

In a process of fortuitous convergences, early Modern Europe and Mughal India shared an analogous rational conception of visuality and had analogous aesthetic expectations. Of mimetic order, the European forms thus served as elaborate tools for the Mughal painters to rationalize and detextualize Persian scriptural pictoriality, and to refine the naturalistic rendition of human and landscape representation. Under Jahangir's patronage, the discursive and symbolic vocabulary this European material conveyed was conspicuously appropriated to semiotize the imperial likeness and construct allegorical tableaux.

However, even in the most clearly borrowed formulas it is possible to detect the activity of other artistic streams, Indian or Persian. For example, the Mughal depiction of Man true to Nature does not solely rely on European models. Instead, it results from the conjugation of the latter with the fine Safavid picturing techniques selectively applied to individualize the human form. Or yet, the very use of the symbolic motif of the halo in imperial portraiture was, I suspect, stimulated by the Mughal encounter with Christian imagery, while the iconographic sources of the Mughal patterns of light drew from pluralistic repertoires of Indic and Christian origin. Nonetheless, crucially, this stimulation was premised upon the Mughal familiarity with such symbolism through Indic art. Therefore, the apparition of the haloed emperor in Jahangiri painting cannot be credited only to the presence of Western artifacts at the Mughal court. It springs from a conjunction of different material factors that prompted the operations of aesthetic consciousness at the basis of this particular pictorial choice in this particular period of Jahangir's artistic sponsorship.

The development of the Mughal imperial portrait, at first in a signaletic form and then fully physiognomic, epitomizes this complex creative dynamic springing from the Mughal tripartite hybridization between the three traditions of Indian, Persian, and European painting.

*THE MULTIPLE FACES OF THE MUGHAL EMPEROR'S LIKENESS*

As an exemplary feature of Mughal pictorial hybridism, Mughal portraiture and more specifically the imperial likeness was the subject of several sections in Chapter 5. The question addressed first concerned the evolution from the phenomenal archetypal body, as it appears in pre-Mughal Sultanate book art, to the phenomenal body true to Nature as it became in Mughal painting, in particular the imperial body with its individualized face. I underlined that, while the idea of picturing a recognizable sovereign by iconographic codes is graspable in Humayuni painting, its actual application in the form of the physiognomic portrait was inaugurated most likely for the first time in the Akbari *kitabkhana*.

Due to its novelty, the practice of portraiture under Akbar's patronage was undergoing research and experiment, a phase easily perceptible in the paintings. Plainly human and, in terms of aesthetic treatment, no different from the rest of the figurations, the Akbari imperial likeness functions on the sole basis of the man's identifiable physical traits and of each picture's narrative context. However, I have suggested that the very production of this likeness per se was to be understood semantically as a super-powerful act in the sense that, for the first time in the Islamic world, it brought into full visibility and cognizability for all to see in images the physique of the most important human being on earth (from a Mughal perspective), the Mughal emperor.

While retaining this plain Akbari formula, Jahangir set out to "semiotize" the imperial portrait for different purposes such as the illustration of the dynasty's history or his own personal thoughts.<sup>1</sup> I interpreted the series of symbolic images, designated "allegorical paintings" in the historiography, as a mythologizing presentation of the emperor's persona within the limitations imposed by Islamic human ontology. The human myth Jahangir constructed around the pictorial figure of the Mughal monarch rests upon a quite particular semiotic system, improperly called "representation" in the studies. In these works, a rich cross-cultural language of visual symbols and allegories among which the halo motif, activates variegated mythological analogies and metaphors, yet these analogies and metaphors neither allow identifying nor disguise the sovereign as a prophet, a magician or an otherworldly ascetic.

Among the numerous innovations Jahangir brought to the Mughal art of portraiture, the systematization amounting to canonization of the profile view has been a subject of focus. A few ideas have come out. The

act of communicating the portrait engages between the represented figure and the spectator has received particular attention in order to sort out the Mughal apprehension of the profiled format. I have identified three qualities or properties inherent to this type of portraiture upon which I think this conscious apprehension has been premised.

The first asset appreciated by the Mughals resided in the phenomenology of pronomination that the communicating modalities of the side-view positioning produces. With the virtual, invisible presence of a third party in between the painted figure and the spectator, the profiled likeness establishes an indirect relationship with the latter and privileges a detached, dedramatized serene viewing of the portrait with minimal psychological and emotional interferences, as no eye contact is possible.

The second quality is the high definition, clarity, and sharpness of the physiognomic description that the profiled formula uniquely allows.

Finally, the third advantage of this formula over the others regards its double capacity to enhance and keep the focus on the phenomenality of the painted figure's external appearances in the inevitable chiasm of the physiological and psychological traits formed in realistic portraiture. In this acute interest for the human morphological phenomenality I detected again the active philosophical force of the Indic approach to corporeality as a vital vitalistic link to Nature in the fiction of art.

To close this analysis, I delivered some thoughts about the distinct imagistic presentation of Shah Jahan. This emperor and his artists retook and creatively pursued the Jahangiri pictorial innovations, enriching them with new creations. Most strikingly, the haloed profiled likeness became Shah Jahan's exclusive mode of appearing in painting. Thus used, the feature turned the imperial image into a glorious secular icon phenomenologically operating like a religious icon—that is, a powerfully semiotized non-religious image conveying religious thoughts and stimulating devotional acts and feelings. If owing to these properties the Shahjahni imperial portrait indeed blurs the line separating the sacred and the profane or challenges the meaning of this divide, it does not erase it and preserves Islamic licitness.

The investigation of the Mughal portrait then naturally placed the focus on the thorny question of the Mughal appropriation of Christian imagery for which I proposed a fresh interpretation.

#### *THE MEANING OF THE CHRISTIAN ICONS IN THE MUGHAL PICTORIAL CONTEXT*

In my endeavor to interpret the Christian iconography in Mughal painting, I have been confronted with an oddity regarding the findings of studies on Christian-Mughal relationships. On the one hand, the failure of Catholic proselytism and the playful or skeptical attitude that the Mughals showed toward Christian representatives during religious disputations, unraveled

by Muzzafar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, highlight the divergences of thought between the two cultures at the expense of convergences. On the other hand, the arts seem to have negotiated these divergences more positively through the valorization of the convergences.

In fact, the prominent placement of Christian icons within highly symbolic artistic spaces marked by the imperial presence attests to a more profound penetration of the European cultural influx in the Mughal consciousness than was apparent from the face-to-face meetings between Europeans and Mughals. On the tenor of these meetings I evoked a simple fact of psychology. Debates based on a frank confrontation of pluralistic ideas necessarily provoke tensions, reactions, and counter-reactions. But to explicate the mechanisms of the more favorable reception of Christianity in Mughal art's forms, I explored the principle of intersectional thinking common to Mughal and Renaissance humanism.

In Mughal India as in Europe, this principle aimed at establishing a concord of truth between a priori incompatible systems of thought. In the Mughal context, this entailed the revalorization and enhancement of the monotheistic affiliation of Christianity with Islam explicated in the Qur'an. In a cultural milieu in which the very practice of figuring constitutes a philosophical act, the Mughal appropriation of the main Christian icons was a natural move. Jahangir made of the Christian-Muslim linkage a powerful rhetorical piece in the visualized religious-political discourse he delivered through his pictorial program.

And yet, this inclusion by no means signifies doctrinal change. Instead it broadens the Islamic metaphysical scope of the Mughal discourse through the deliberate cognizability, in visual forms, of Islam's monotheistic precedents. Addressing the diverse spiritual, social, and political questions of the day at court, in Mughal society it makes sense that the king set out to integrate in his pictorial program some form of commentary on the two related faiths and communities. The Christian icons of Jesus, Mary, and the angels thus became part of Mughal imperial iconography, not through successful persuasion by Christians missionaries, but fundamentally, as a pertinent Muslim response to the intellectual stimulus of Christian proselyte activities throughout the subcontinent.

I offered an additional explanation about the nature and content of this response. The visual program juxtaposing the unaltered Christian figures with the imperial likeness would posit the sovereign as the legitimate Muslim commentator of the two monotheistic spiritualities, and a fortiori the proclaimer of Islam as the true complete religion in relation to the previous incomplete divine revelations. But again, beyond this apparent religious message about Christian-Muslim convergences and divergences, in a subterranean manner and at the aesthetic level of the images I also perceive the work of the conceptual forces of the Indic metaphysics of figurality, in

particular in this use of holy figures expressing unambiguously the Christian ipseity.

However, it has been important to stipulate that as a general rule and properly understood in their syntactical order, these Jahangiri and Shahjahani configurations of sacred and profane icons (the Mughal emperor's luminous image constituting a non-religious icon) respect the founding principles of Islamic ontology as stated in the Qur'an. In these pictures every icon bears the exact significance given to it by the Islamic (Quranic) order of things; the motif of the cross, for example, clearly signals the Christian narrative about Jesus, but at the same time, it self-evidently declares its wrongness in relation to the Islamic version of this narrative, which entirely controls the imagistic *semiosis*. With this interpretation as a backdrop, I argued that the rare exceptions transgressing the Islamic doctrine of the non-representability of God are more indicative of the Indianness of the Mughal pictorial aesthetics, modeled by the Indic conceptual forces mentioned above, than genuine infractions of Islamic laws on idolatry. To me, they manifest the Mughals' serenity vis-à-vis the figural acquired in India, a serenity supported by their high spiritual feeling about their incorruptible and uncorrupted Islamic faith.

### Last Words

After the Jahangiri unbridled hybridizations, no other pictorial transculturation took place at Shah Jahan's court, except for Indian transregional intersectionalities. For this reason, I did not further investigate the paintings of the Shajahani era. The transcontinental aesthetic created under Jahangir's patronage became in the Shahjahani period a fully internalized *habitus*, making talking about hybridity no longer relevant. The Shajahani non-hybrid pictorial art thus led to the end of this book, for now.

### Notes

- 1 Expression used in the introduction of *Paris School Semiotics: Theory*, xvii.



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**Note:** This is not a book on the history of Mughal painting; therefore, this list does not comprise an exhaustive bibliography on this topic and related Persianate productions. Only references directly relevant to this critical study have been included.

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