

Part II

Imagining Europe from the Outside

European Matter and Mughal Spirit

Imaging Europe in Early Modern Mughal Painting

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1. Introduction

One reaction to Dipesh Chakrabarty's famous call to »provincialise Europe« and to the overt and latent Eurocentrism in the humanities is the reversal of perspective in academic studies of cultural contacts. When analysing pre-colonial and colonial contacts, it is appropriate to ask not how Europeans imagined people on other continents, but how Africans, Asians and Americans perceived and portrayed Europeans.¹ The aim of this change in perspective, however, is not merely to determine the importance or unimportance of Europe from an African, Asian or American standpoint but to gain a more multi-faceted and multi-layered view of entangled history. In fact, the reversal of perspective has not only led to questioning the traditional scholarly characterisations of the historical actors as, say, »centre and periphery« or »sender and receiver«, it has also contributed to the development of new methodological approaches to describing cultural contacts. For example, the notion of a »European influence« has largely been replaced by concepts such as appropriation, adaptation, and translation, to name but a

1 See Chakrabarty 2008. A classic of this reversal is Lips 1937, which contrasts the colonial view of the west with the view of the colonised peoples. A recent research project following this approach is »Images of Europe Beyond Europe« led by Matthias Weiß at the Bibliotheca Hertziana, Max-Planck-Institut for Art History, <https://www.biblhertz.it/de/dept-michalsky/images-of-europe> (accessed August 3, 2021).

few, which no longer see the active and determining part of cultural transfers in the supposed »senders« but in the »receivers«. This shift is also true with regard to more recent research on the Early Modern Indian Mughal dynasty and especially on the court's reception of European art.² For example, Mika Natif, referring to the concept of European Orientalism, which was significantly coined by Edward Said, speaks also of a »Mughal Occidentalism«.³

This chapter follows this approach, examining pictorial representations of Europeans in Mughal painting at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries. It asks what image of Europe these paintings evoke and how this image was related to the culture and the moral and religious norms of the Mughal court.

Works of visual art are of particular relevance for the Mughal imagination of Europe. Not only were Europeans a popular motif in court painting, but works of art from Europe also aroused great interest among court artists. The Mughal painters' artistic engagement with Europe thus took place on two levels, both in terms of motifs, and in the techniques and styles of pictorial representation. The fact that distinct painting styles were associated with different ways of looking at the world, and sometimes also quite decidedly with competing worldviews, is well known in modern times.⁴ For the early Mughal Dynasty, too, the confrontation with European images was not merely aesthetic. The claim of a mimetic representation of the visible world often associated with European art, as well as the religious veneration of images conveyed by Christian missionaries, provided the Sunni Mughals with an occasion for critical reflection and commentary on their own treatment of images.

- 2 This question has also been discussed for Mughal India in the period before colonisation by Europeans with a focus on trade and art. See Das 2020; Natif 2018; Govil 2008; Juneja 2008; Subrahmanyam 2005a; Subrahmanyam 2005b; Beach 2004. Regarding the perception of the Portuguese in Asia see Flores 2014.
- 3 See Natif 2018, 8–9. In contrast to the pejorative and essentialising European Orientalism criticised by Said and later scholars, Natif is less critical of Mughal Occidentalism because it was less defined by the binary of »self« and »other« and allowed for more complex constructions of cultural identity.
- 4 See for example Curley 2018 on the stylistic binary between American Abstraction versus Soviet Socialist Realism in the time of the Cold War, or Orhan Pamuk's historical novel (2001) about the Ottoman artists' conflict in dealing with western European painting style.

2. European figures as examples of non-normative behaviour

In general, the early relationship between the Mughals, a branch of the Timurid dynasty originating in Central Asia that came to power in Delhi in 1526, and the representatives of Europe was characterised on both sides by a sense of cultural superiority.⁵ The Mughals generally referred to Europeans as »firangi«, as »Franks«, and rarely distinguished between different European nations. Even though the Mughals seemed to show little interest in the geography or political conditions of the »insignificant island« of Europe, they did have a keen interest in European techniques and sciences.⁶

The Europeans were considered technically skilled, but also untrustworthy and rude. The Indian scholar Sanjay Subrahmanyam has collected numerous sources that confirm such a view.⁷ At his first encounter with Europeans when he gave an audience during a campaign in Gujarat, Mughal Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) is said to have questioned his guests about their customs. In doing so, Akbar harboured the desire to cultivate this »savage race«.⁸ Contacts with Europeans were still rare at that time. However, particularly telling is a description by the Mughal envoy Tahir Muhammad who travelled to Goa in 1579–1580 to meet the Portuguese:

In sum, the community of Franks wear[s] very fine clothes but they are often very slovenly and pimply. They don't like to use water. They bathe very rarely. Amongst them, washing after relieving oneself is considered improper. They are very good at using firearms, and they are particularly brave on ships and in the water. But in contrast to this, they are not so brave on land.⁹

5 For the Mughal part see for example Natif 2018, 37.

6 Govil 2008, 240. While Digby 1999 refers to mythical stories that entwined themselves around Europe and its geography in Mughal literature, Koch 2010 was able to demonstrate that the Mughal court was not only interested in European cartography, but purposefully adapted cartographic forms and techniques for its own purposes. The reception of Europe thus took place on different levels.

7 Subrahmanyam 2005a.

8 Abu'l Fazl 2000, vol. 3, 37.

9 From *Rauzat al-Tahirin*, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ms. Elliot 314, cited after Subrahmanyam 2005a, 86–87.

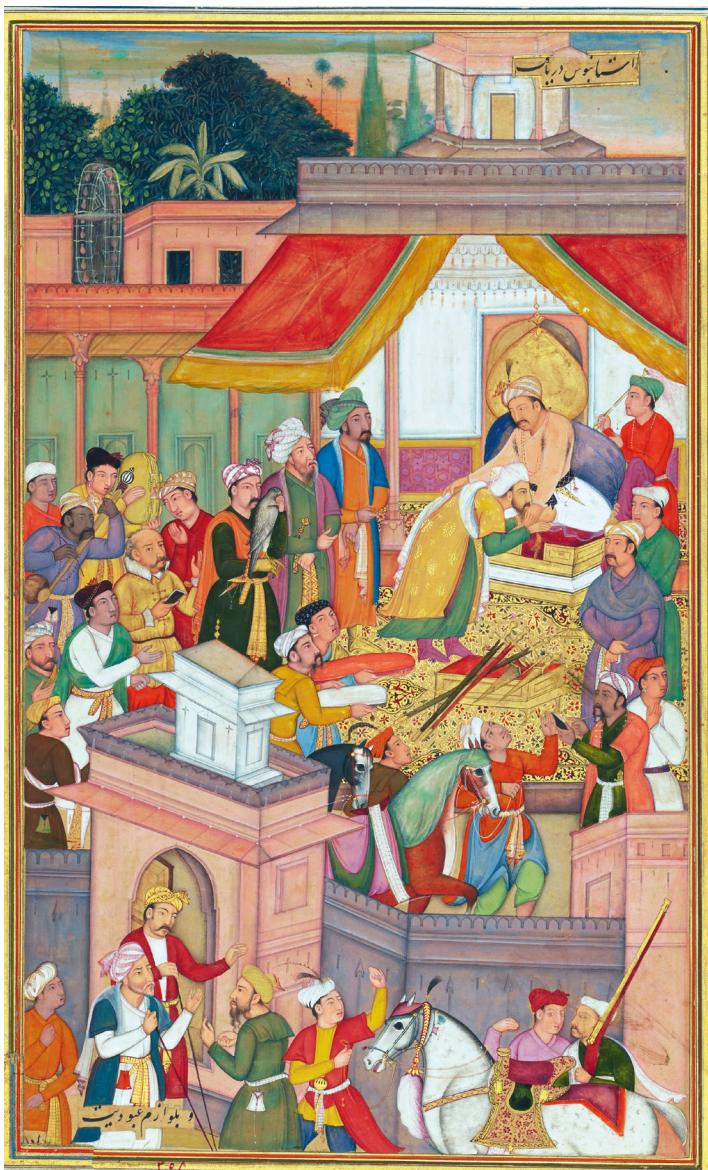


Fig. 1: Dharm Das, Akbar Receives Congratulations on the Birth of his Son Murad, Agra, June 1570, pigment and gold on paper, 45.4 x 27.2 cm, 1603–1605, Chester Beatty Library, In 03.147.¹⁰

10 Source: https://viewer.cbl.ie/viewer/image/In_03_147/2/ (accessed September 19, 2022).

The contacts with agents from the continent became more frequent after Akbar invited Jesuit missionaries to Fatehpur Sikri in 1580 and European ambassadors and emissaries came to visit the court. However, Europeans could not claim any particular importance at court, as depictions of Mughal court assemblies suggest. Representatives of the continent that appear in these paintings are usually placed at a notable distance from the ruler. The distance to the emperor marked the rank of the respective person at court.¹¹ An *Akbarnama* illustration attributed to Dharm Das and dated around 1603–1605 gives an impression of this. It shows Akbar receiving congratulations on the birth of his son Murad in June 1570 (fig. 1). Among the well-wishers appears a man dressed in a golden doublet and lace collar. He stands out from the other figures not only because of his European clothing but also because of his lack of headgear. As we know from reports by European travellers as well as from Asian sources, being bareheaded was generally considered a breach of etiquette and a sign of dishonour.¹² Nothing is known about a European representative at the court in Agra during this period, and it is very questionable to what extent the painting, made more than 30 years after the event, is historically accurate.¹³ Another work that is artistically less appealing but almost identical in terms of composition and iconography depicts the bestowal of a robe of honour at which the English ambassador Sir Thomas Roe (c. 1581–1644, Ambassador at the Mughal court 1615–1618) was present.¹⁴ The same composition is thus supposed to represent two events that took place more than four decades apart. In both paintings the European is a staffage figure who not only indicates the far reaching relations of the Mughal court, but also the Europeans' unsophisticated manners. As in Tahir Muhammad's description, the European man in the painting is characterised not only by his misbehaviour but also by his expensive and extravagant clothes.

Sometimes, however, the depictions of Europeans represented transgressions of moral and religious norms that were common in Mughal court society itself: for example, the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Even though

11 Eaton 1993, 160.

12 Flüchter 2016, 102; Kaicker 2014, 189; Chopra 1963, 8.

13 Beach (2004, 177) is certain that no European was present at the ceremony.

14 See British Museum, Number 1933,0610,0.1. Sir Thomas Roe was ambassador to the court of Jahangir from 1615–1618. However, the European figure in the version attributed to Dharm Das looks more like Roe than the figure in the painting of the British Museum. The dating of the Chester Beatty Library miniature should be reconsidered.

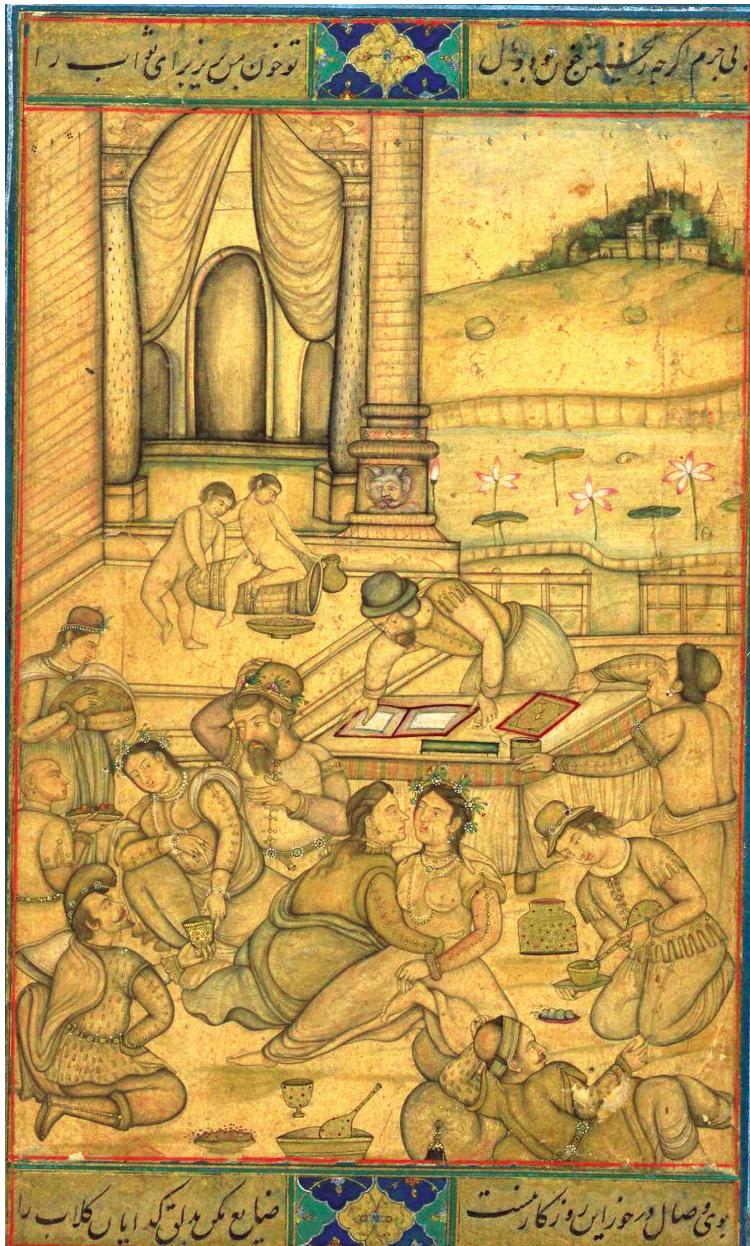


Fig. 2: Anonymous Mughal artist, *A Party of Carousing Europeans*, ink and watercolour on paper, 21.2 × 12.6 cm, ca. 1605, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, D. 399–1885. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

alcoholic drinks are forbidden in Islam, drinking was usual at the Mughal court to such an extent that it caused serious damage to courtiers and rulers.¹⁵ Alcoholism was even a common cause of death among Mughal princes. Emperor Jahangir's (r. 1605–1627) two younger brothers died of alcoholism and the addiction of the Shah himself is also well documented.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it seems that the Mughals preferred to illustrate excessive alcohol consumption and associated misbehaviour by depicting European figures. Sometimes these paintings show veritable orgies during which the European carousers also engage in erotic relations (fig. 2).

Other images, however, seem to suggest that the depictions of European drinking carousals were projections of the desires and vices of the court society itself. In a *nim qalam* drawing, the painter Basawan shows a weighty man resting on a large cushion with his hat slipped forward as a sign of his inebriation (fig. 3). Clothing and especially hats were a distinctive feature of the Europeans, who, accordingly, were also called *kulah-poshan* (hat wearers).¹⁷ While the hat seems to indicate a »firangi«, the shaved head visible under the headdress, the leg dress and especially the manner of sitting common to rulers and heroic figures in Persian painting, however, are indications that the man is more likely a Mughal courtier.¹⁸ In fact, Portuguese fashion enjoyed some popularity at court, and Akbar and Jahangir themselves sometimes wore European clothing.¹⁹ Comparable to roughly contemporaneous Oriental masquerades in Europe, the drawing probably shows an Occidental masquerade, in which the subject is depicted in the playful disguise of a European whose accompanying behaviour is presented as transgressive of official norms.²⁰ The general ability of images to transcend boundaries, to open up new ways of seeing, and to question moral and religious norms

15 Depictions of drinking bouts also exist in Persian painting, from which the Mughal artistic tradition developed. Paintings of Shah Babur's autobiography even show the Mughal emperor in a drunken state. Such depictions, however, are an exception; cf. Beach 2012, 13.

16 Schimmel 2000, 235–242.

17 Subrahmanyam 2005a, 72.

18 Regarding the attribution to Basawan see Beach 2012, 168. Verma 2002, 222, describes the figure as a musician because of the stringed instrument (*rubab*).

19 Flores 2014, 40.

20 This also applies to the field of sexuality. Das (2020, 157) states »that the European female figures became a vehicle to allegorically project indecent and amoral acts in Mughal India.« A similar strategy representing Europeans to deal with non-normative sexual behaviour can be found in contemporary paintings from Safavid Persia; see Babaie 2009.



Fig. 3: Attributed to Basawan, *Man in European Clothes*, opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 8.5 x 8 cm, c. 1585, Washington, D. C., Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, F1953.60.²¹

is reinforced here by marking the figures as foreign.²² As Das and Gupta put it: »The non-familiar imagery [...] functioned as an easy tool to pictorially legitimise certain restricted behavior.«²³

While depictions of Europeans could provide examples of bad manners and uncultivated behaviour, Europe was, nevertheless, considered a source of numerous miracles. In addition to various animals and plants, some of which were imported by Europeans from America, Europeans also brought technical devices and instruments to India, such as globes and an organ.²⁴ Mughal painters portrayed these special objects and adapted them for their

21 Source: https://www.si.edu/search?edan_q=F1953.60& (accessed September 19, 2022).

22 On the ability of images to create spaces of reflection which deviate from written discourses, see Juneja 2009, 204.

23 Das/Gupta 2015, 70.

24 On the globe see Ramaswamy 2007.

pictorial representations. Artworks from Europe aroused much interest, too. Prints and paintings brought by European envoys and missionaries met with particularly open and experimental artists in the workshops of the Shahs Akbar and Jahangir. A creative environment had developed at the Mughal court through contact between traditional Persian and local Indian painting, into which adaptations from the European visual arts increasingly flowed from the 1580s onwards.

3. European painting style

Mughal court painters not only used European motifs, but also oriented themselves towards the »naturalism and precise visual observation«²⁵ that distinguished European visual arts. In doing so the artists followed their Emperors' interest. Akbar's enthusiasm for portraiture, for example, can be seen as a direct reaction to European paintings of this genre.²⁶ The examination of European models also inspired Mughal painters to engage in naturalistic depictions of plants and animals. Some artists adopted the pictorial representation of body volumes through shading or the depiction of strong emotions in their figures. With these adaptations Mughal court art partially strayed from its roots in Persian painting, which traditionally tends to represent a shadowless world with idealised, elegantly posing figures, and increasingly turned to a mimetic representation of the visible world.

The court historian Abu'l Fazl described this new quality when he reported on the development of painting at Akbar's court in the late 1590s:

Most excellent painters are now to be found, and masterpieces worthy of a Bihzad may be placed at the side of the wonderful works of the European painters who have attained world-wide fame. The minuteness in detail, the general finish, the boldness of execution, etc. now observed in pictures, are incomparable, even inanimate objects look as if they had life.²⁷

25 Beach 2012, 23.

26 On Akbar's enthusiasm for the new genre see Abu'l Fazl 1927, 115.

27 Abu'l Fazl, 1927, 113–114.

In this passage Abu'l Fazl relates Mughal court art to the tradition of Persian painting, of which Bihzad from Herat (1455–1535) was an outstanding representative, and to unspecified European painters. Another artistic tradition to which Abu'l Fazl compared Mughal court painting was the Chinese. In his praise of the painter Daswanth he states rather succinctly: »His paintings were not behind those of Bihzad and the painters of China.«²⁸ While the previous comparison with the painters of Europe is not surprising given the recent contacts, no direct exchange with Chinese painters or paintings has been reported during this period.²⁹ Abu'l Fazl's mention of the Chinese masters can rather be explained as an implicit reference to Persian art literature. In this literature, the painting traditions of Europe and China were described as essential poles of tension to which Persian painting related and from which it differed.³⁰

A story narrated by various authors characterises the different styles in the context of a competition between Greek and Chinese artists.³¹ Alexander the Great, who had to judge which nation produced the better artists, had a large curtain stretched through the middle of a hall and the competitors painted the opposite walls. While the Greeks applied the finest pigments, the Chinese used no colours at all. When both parties had finished, the curtain was pulled aside and to Alexander's amazement, the same painting appeared on both sides. When the curtain was drawn again, the painting of the Greeks remained, while the wall of the Chinese now showed the curtain. The Chinese had polished their wall so that it became a perfect mirror (fig. 4).

In the slightly varying versions of the story the competition is assessed differently. While in Nizami's account Alexander does not name a clear winner, choosing the Europeans as superior in painting and the Chinese in polishing, most authors rank the art of polishing higher.³² The practice of mirror-making

28 Abu'l Fazl, 2000, vol. 3, 651.

29 While the Mughal court received luxury goods from China, no direct contacts can be traced in the field of graphics and drawing. Most reminiscences of Chinese painting found in Mughal art, such as certain motifs (dragons, tigers, etc.) and stylistic peculiarities, were probably conveyed via the Persian tradition, as were the tropes of artistic competition with China; see Srivastava 2000, 63–72.

30 See Necipoğlu 2016; Weis 2020.

31 On the narrative tradition of this artistic competition see Soucek 1972; Piemontese 1995; Lamei 2001; Necipoğlu 2016.

32 Weis 2020, 67, 100.

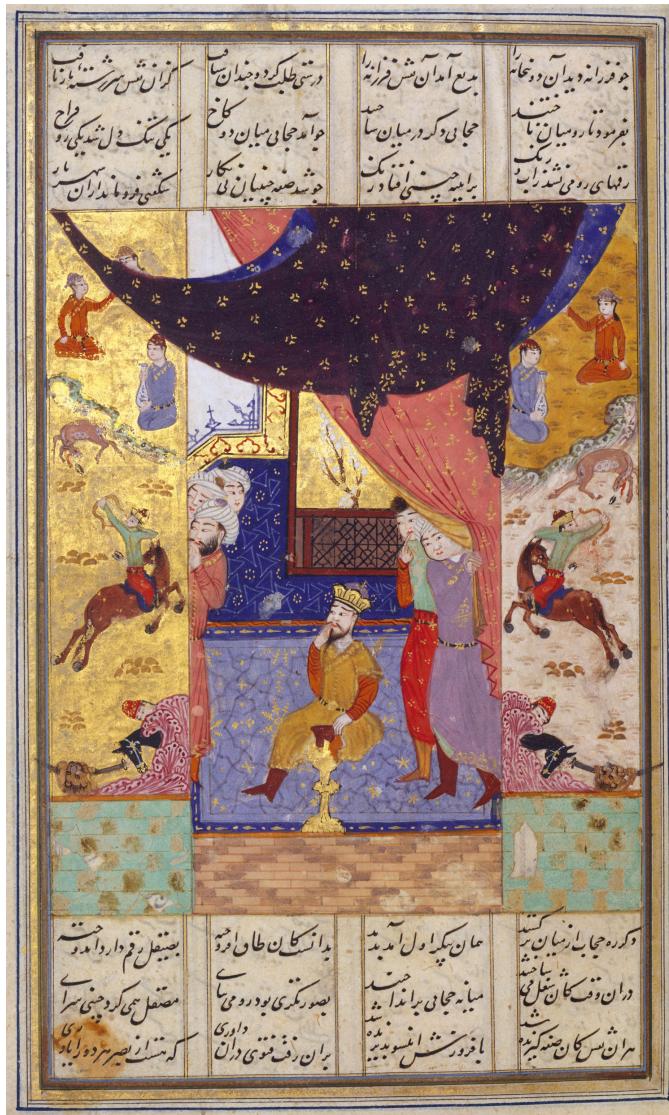


Fig. 4: Anonymous, *The Byzantine and Chinese Painters Vie in a Trial of Skill*, from *Khamsa* (Quintet) by Nizami of Ganja, Iran, Shiraz, opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 25.4 x 15.9 cm (page), ca. 1450, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 13.228.3, fol. 332r.³³

33 Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Khamsa_\(Quintet\)_of_Nizami_MET_DT210395.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Khamsa_(Quintet)_of_Nizami_MET_DT210395.jpg) (accessed September 19, 2022).

is likened to the pursuit of spiritual wisdom by Sufis who purify their hearts to make them a mirror of God, or the mirror becomes, as in the version of the poet Amir Khusraw from Delhi, an instrument for a deeper understanding of divine creation.³⁴ The art of the Greeks (*rumi*), on the other hand, who are equated with the »firangi« in later versions, is seen to correspond to the striving of scholars seeking external truth. Even if the evaluation of the two artistic traditions does not coincide in all versions of the story, it does not seem inappropriate to see in it, if not a criticism, at least a clear characterisation of European art as oriented towards the mimetic reproduction of the external world and less towards spiritual essence.³⁵

The distinction of artistic traditions into one directed at the outer world and one directed at inner, spiritual truth, can easily lead to condemnation of the former as merely superficial. However, Mughal court historian and minister Abu'l Fazl defended the European painters against such criticism when he explained that they could lead the viewers to higher truths by depicting external forms: »Although in general they make pictures of material resemblances, the European masters express with rare forms many meanings of the created world and [thus] they lead those who see only the outside of things to the place of real truth.«³⁶

While Akbar and his minister Abu'l Fazl appreciated European art, it was probably a vexation for the more orthodox Muslims at court.³⁷ This was not only because of the mimetic claim of European painting style, which could be interpreted as the artist's attempt to compare himself with the Creator God, but even more because of the Christian cult images brought by Jesu-

34 See Lamei 2001, 83. Amir Khusraw's version of the Alexander novel (*Ayina-yi Iskandari*, 1299) was well-known at the Mughal court and lavishly illustrated. Khusraw gives prominence to the Chinese production of a mirror. See Piemontese 1995, 297–298. The Walters Art Museum in Baltimore holds a luxury copy of Khusraw's work (W.624) that was made during Akbar's reign (1597–1598). Eight pages of this book are kept in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

35 Cf. Necipoğlu 2016, 48.

36 Koch 2019, 211. I refer to the translation of this passage from Abu'l Fazl's *A'in-i Akbari* suggested by Ebba Koch because it stresses the ability of painting to express »inner truth« through the representation of outward forms.

37 European as well as Mughal sources confirm that Muslim courtiers rejected the European images and opposed their use at court. Jahangir's nephew and successor Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) turned away from patronising painting for religious reasons. See Beach 2004, 178.

it missionaries.³⁸ These holy images were not only held in veneration at the court but were even integrated in the Mughal rulers' representation.³⁹ Akbar himself defended the art of painting against religious hostility to images and described it as a way of seeking God:

There are many that hate painting; but such men I dislike. It appears to me as if the 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 on his work, and is thus forced to think of God, the giver of life, and thus will increase in knowledge.⁴⁰

In addition to this argument, which negates the opinion derived from the Hadith that an artist's work competes with the Creator God, the Mughal ruler emphasised that painting was not merely about imitating the external world.⁴¹ In fact, the Shahs claimed for themselves an ability to recognise the spiritual core (*ma'ni*) behind the external forms (*surat*) of things. And they asserted in addition that they could transfer this ability to their court artists. Abu'l Fazl mentions that it was simply Akbar's gaze which caused the painter Abd al-Samad to direct his attention away from outer form and towards inner meaning.⁴² Through the power of the ruler's gaze, the artist was able to create works that went beyond a mere rendering of the visible world.

Even though Abu'l Fazl defended the European masters, and ultimately painting in general, against the accusation of superficiality, European painting was considered to be primarily focused on the external, visible world. Kavita Singh has argued that the connotation of different painting styles with particular ways of seeing the world can not only be found in

38 For this notion in Sunni tradition see Almir 2004, 60.

39 See for example Koch 2019; Weis 2006.

40 Abu'l Fazl 1927, 115.

41 For an interpretation of this statement by Abu'l Fazl against the background of the rejection of figurative images in the *hadith*, the transmitted statements and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, see Verma 2000–2001, 512–513.

42 Abu'l Fazl 1927, 117. On this passage and the distinction between outward form and inner meaning in Mughal painting, see Saviello 2019, 246. On the general importance of the notions of *ma'ni* and *surat* for the representation of the Mughal rulers, see Franke 2014.

literature but has also shaped artistic practice itself. In an 18th-century painting from Lucknow, the artist Mir Kalan Khan juxtaposed a Europeanising and a Persianate style of painting to visualise two different levels of reality in one image: an actual singer and the ideal lovers she sings about.⁴³ This parallel use of the different styles can, according to Singh, be regarded as a self-referential play with the illusionistic and idealising capacities of painting, a pictorial reflection on different levels of reality that can also be found in Islamic Neoplatonism.⁴⁴

A similar juxtaposition of different modes of pictorial representation is also evident in some *nim qalam* drawings that depict an episode from the story of Layla and Qays (fig. 5). Already as a child, Qays and Layla fall in love. However, she remains unattainable for him, and Qays's affection increases into a feeling that completely determines him. He breaks all ties with society and moves to the desert, living on his love and poetry alone. He is called Majnun, which means »mad man« or »one who is possessed by Jinns«. In his excessive love he resembles a religious mystic or Sufi directing all his aspirations towards God. From the Akbar period come depictions of Layla and Majnun who, after being separated in their childhood, meet again. Although Layla also loves no one other than Majnun and remains steadfastly faithful to him despite a marriage forced upon her, the lovers again do not become a couple. At this point, Majnun had already left all earthly desire behind. Layla, who visits Majnun in the desert, is characterised in all depictions by a European garment. Ebba Koch assumes that her figure was inspired by the *Pietas Regia*, a personification from the title page of the second volume of the Plantin Bible that was brought to the Mughal court in 1580 by Jesuit missionaries.⁴⁵ In a somewhat modified depiction, Layla's European appearance is enhanced by a Renaissance folding armchair, known in Italy as a »Savonarola« chair (fig. 6).⁴⁶ The difference between the lovers is further emphasised by Layla's enormous physical presence, the volume of which is particularly accentuated by the technique of shading. The crouching figure of Majnun, emaciated to the bone, on the other hand, corresponds to the models of Persian book painting.

43 Singh 2017, 6–11.

44 Singh 2017, 69.

45 Koch 2010, 218.

46 On the appearances of the »Savonarola« chair in Mughal painting, see Cimino 1987.

In his study of the motifs of love, madness and mystical longing for God in Nizami's *Layla and Majnun*, Seyed-Gohrab has pointed out that in mysticism, Layla represented a way of grasping the beauty of God in earthly forms and terms.⁴⁷ However, the beauty of the woman and the desire for her are transcended in the search for God. In the drawings, the contrast between material beauty and the ascetic renunciation of earthly things, which stands for the goal of spiritualisation, is thus made apparent in the juxtaposition of figures that are clearly connected to the European or Persian artistic tradition. The majestic European figure of Layla represents the beauty and opulence of the material world, a world that the ascetic Majnun renounces as a spiritual seeker of God. The distinction between Layla and Majnun as representatives of different cultural traditions seems all the more significant when one considers that Majnun, as Ebba Koch has shown, was a kind of identification figure for the Shahs Jahangir and his son Jahan (r. 1627–1658).⁴⁸ While Majnun personifies the Sufi ideals of Mughal culture, Layla is stylised as the Other, a rich and beautiful European woman.

Majnun's effort to overcome his state of wonder and to look behind the compelling physical beauty of his beloved is symbolised by the gesture of the finger raised to the mouth. This gesture, also seen in the depiction of Alexander gazing at the Chinese mirror (fig. 4), is a standard motif in Persian painting, expressing the viewer's astonishment and his desire to overcome his state of wonder and reach an intellectual understanding.⁴⁹ In Manohar's other version of this subject the difference between Layla and Majnun is underlined by the text on the sheet Layla holds (fig. 5). It describes Majnun's deliberate turning away: »One night, Majnun said to Layla: O you, the careless beloved, Certainly you will have a lover, but he will not be Majnun.«⁵⁰

47 Seyed-Gohrab 2003, 216.

48 Koch 2010, 279.

49 This gesture of the ruler appears in all known pictorial representations of the story and is concretely described in Nizami's and in Amir Khusraw's versions. See Lamei 2001, 25, 72, 79. It shows the viewer's astonishment, but also his desire to discern meaning behind the visual appearance of the image. On the significance of the gesture of the finger brought to the mouth in the context of the Persian painting tradition, see Saviello 2016.

50 Koch 2010, 291.



Fig. 5: Attributed to Manohar, *Layla and Majnun*, ca. 1595–1600, ca. 14.9 x 9.1 cm, detail of an album page from the *Muraqqa-i Gulshan* (Gulshan Album), Tehran, Gulistan Palace Library, no. 1663, p. 248.⁵¹

51 Koch 2010, 281. I thank Ebba Koch for her suggestions on this chapter and for generously providing the photograph reproduced here.



Fig. 6: Manohar, *Majnun and Layla*, c. 1605, 13 x 8.7 cm, formerly Paris, Ancienne collection Duffeuty and Galerie Jean Soustiel, location unknown, in: Soustiel 1986, 19.

4. Conclusion: A dialectic reception of European mimetic art

While the Mughal court of the 16th and early 17th centuries seemed to have little interest in Europe as a geographical and political entity, people and goods from the continent were not only welcome but were also popular motifs in the visual arts. Similar to contemporary European depictions of Asians, Mughal representations of Europeans often served to legitimise the depiction of subjects that transcended moral and religious norms. Thus, Mughal Occidentalism seems akin to European Orientalism in its function of projecting one's own fears and desires onto the body of the »Other«.

The most striking aspect of Mughal Occidentalism, however, is the topos of the materialism and superficiality of European culture that emerges in both pictorial representations and written sources. The Mughal court's enthusiasm for the natural and technological »wonders« that Europeans brought with them, including visual arts that aimed at the mimetic representation of the visible world, was countered by an abiding scepticism about supposed European materialism. The accusation of Europeans' boastful appearance and lack of cultivation in the early texts finds a parallel in the characterisation of European art as primarily focused on the external world. The materialism and technical savvy identified with European culture and the European style of painting were not completely rejected, however, but were balanced by the Mughals with idealism and spirituality derived from their Persian roots and Sufi mysticism. In a kind of dialectical process, Mughal court artists refined the mimetic approach of European painting with the traditional idealising style of Persian painting to synthesise a more sophisticated Mughal art that would be able to combine both the external material world and inner truth in a single pictorial representation.

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