

SELFHOOD AND SUBJECTIVITY IN SUFI THOUGHT: IMAGE OF A MOLE ON EMPEROR AKBAR'S NOSE

Dipanwita Donde
International Research Project
"Bilderfahrzeuge: Aby Warburg's Legacy and the Future of
Iconology", Max Weber Stiftung, India
E-mail: donde@bilderfahrzeuge.org

Abstract: This paper addresses the making of portrait-images of Mughal emperors, in which distinctness and particularity in individual features distinguished portraits of emperor Akbar from his ancestors and successors. Scholars have argued that the technique of 'accurate' portraits or mimesis was introduced to Mughal artists with the arrival of renaissance paintings and prints from Europe, brought by Jesuit priests to the Mughal court. However, the question of why Mughal emperors saw a need to arrive at portraiture in the likeness of individuals remains to be addressed. This paper argues that the desire to portray a ruler, in all his individual particularity, can arise only within a literary and intellectual matrix in which the individual is valued and where ideas about selfhood and subjectivity have already permeated the philosophical, political, and literary thought. Tracing the transhistorical and transcultural migration of ideas and motifs from Timurid Central Asia to Mughal India, this paper examines the transference of Sufi thought on image-making practices, particularly portraiture, in the imperial court of the Mughals in early seventeenth century.

Keywords: Portrait-images of Akbar; subjectivity; Sufi thought; poetics between text and image.

Article history: Received: 12 June 2021 | Revised: 16 September 2021 |
Accepted: 15 October 2021 | Available online: 01 December 2021

How to cite this article:

Donde, Dipanwita. "Selfhood and Subjectivity in Sufi Thought: Image of a Mole on Emperor Akbar's Nose". *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 11, no. 2 (2021): 216–239.
<https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2021.11.2.216-239>

Introduction

In sixteenth-century India, portraiture displaying verisimilitude developed in the court of Akbar (r.1556-1604). This was an important shift in the history of Indian art, which had been depicting the human form for millennia but without distinctness and individuality.¹ Instead, iconographic formulae and conventions were used to denote individuals, seen in sculptures, and in painting during pre-Mughal times. The absence of verisimilitude in Indian art was reversed during the reign of Akbar in the latter half of the sixteenth century. How and why did portraiture, in ‘true likeness’, gain currency during the reign of Akbar?

The encounter with European art is acknowledged as the catalyst for the genesis of portraiture in Mughal art.² Akbar evidently first met Europeans in 1572 during the campaign in Gujarat. Shortly after, Jesuit missionaries arrived at his court; merchants from Europe too sought audience with him to get permission to trade with the Mughal empire. Through them, European renaissance art arrived at the Mughal court in the form of prints and paintings. Akbar was intrigued by European images and ordered his artists to study and copy them. Therefore, without any doubt, the technique of ‘accurate’ portraits or mimesis³, which include studies from life, must have been derived from European art. However, the question of why Mughal emperors saw a need to illustrate portraits in the likeness of the individual, remains to be answered.

Milo Beach has argued that Akbar’s interest in the rational and historically verifiable facts, coupled with the interest in historical events and preoccupation with historical personalities, coincided with the emergence of a naturalistic style observed in Mughal art. For the first time, Mughal art could attain the means to faithfully recreate the natural world, just as histories were being written with careful attention to empirical facts. According to Beach, it is this coincidence

¹ The Gandhara stuccos, which were a fusion of Greco-Roman and Indian styles, are an exception. The Gandhara Buddha image was inspired by Hellenistic realism, tempered by Persian, Scythian and Parthian models.

² Milo Cleveland Beach, *The Imperial Image: Paintings for the Mughal Court* (Washington D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1981), 16.

³ The technique of mimesis included drawing from life, the addition of tones, shades and tints to create volume and depth, and the rendering of atmospheric perspective and deep space vista to suggest distance and recession.

of the historical impulse and naturalistic art styles that led to the development of portraiture.⁴

While agreeing with Beach's analysis, I believe that this is only one of several strands underlying the project to capture the life of an individual ruler, in both image and text. The desire to portray a ruler, in all his individual particularity, can arise only within a matrix in which the individual is valued, and where ideas about selfhood and subjectivity have already permeated the philosophical, political and literary thought.

To trace the genesis of portraiture in Mughal art during the reign of Akbar, it is necessary to look beyond stylistic similarities between Akbari portraits and European art. Further, it is imperative to try and locate if there existed literary expressions in the form of pen portraits of sultans and their subjects in Persian models. It may then appear that the transference of European artistic techniques and the practice of mimesis gave Mughal artists the tool to actually accomplish what artists like Bihzad (c.1450-c.1535) had already set out to achieve during the artistic shift that flourished at the Timurid court of Sultan Husain Bayqara in the fifteenth century.⁵

Something extraordinary was emerging at the court of Sultan Husain Bayqara, after he re-captured the city of Herat in 1469. Under the patronage of a connoisseur sultan, poets at the imperial court re-discovered notions of self-hood and subjectivity explored by early medieval Sufi poets and philosophers in Persia and cited these ideas in contemporary literature. Simultaneously, imperial artists too, driven by the sultan's thirst for rare and exquisitely produced illustrated manuscripts, explored new ways of developing a pictorial vocabulary that corresponded with the rich flow of Sufi thought of contemporary poets, to express subjectivity and emotions in their artistic compositions.

Tracing the Origin of Portrait-Images in Central Asia

The most distinguished painter whose works were highly prized

⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁵ Yael Rice in her Ph.D. dissertation writes, "European works of art may have presented artists with the strategies to render their images in a more mimetic manner; the impetus for doing so, however, lay in an already well-established courtly interest in physiognomic analysis." See Yael Rice, "The Emperor's Eye and the Painter's Brush: The Rise of the Mughal Court Artist, c.1546-1627" (Ph.D. Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2011), 14.

was Kamal ad-Din Bihzad (1455-1535). He was a great artist of medieval Central Asia, honoured by his contemporaries as well by connoisseurs of our time. We know from contemporary writings by Dost Mohammad and Mirza Haider that Bihzad was a pupil of Pir Sayid Ahmad from Tabriz. He began painting during the last two decades of the fifteenth century.⁶ He became a painter at the court of Sultan Husain Bayqara. Introduced to Sufi ideology by the two towering personalities, Jami and Mir Ali Sher Nawai at Bayqara's court, Bihzad is credited with revolutionizing Persian miniature art by moving towards the expression of new pictorial motifs and the articulation of visual narratives with Sufi themes in paintings of the late Timurid period (1485-1506).⁷

David Roxburgh has argued that Bihzad's art led to a new artistic shift that is reflected in some of the following innovations introduced by him in the Persian painting tradition: "the introduction of temporality by depicting figures in a greater variety of postures and attitudes, the representation of figures engaged in animated speech and gestures, and a pictorial elaboration that pushed the trope of the text's strict narrative requirements to almost challenge and subverted the story's central subject."⁸ In addition, the inclusion of figures engaged in peripheral action produced lively compositions and enabled extraordinary layering of meanings. The introduction of a psychological dimension is also observed.⁹

Further, the naturalism reflected in Bihzad's art included the representation of daily activities and the variety of emotions displayed on the facial features, which stress the diversity of figures that populate the dense compositions.¹⁰ Colour too played an important

⁶ The British Museum has a superb manuscript with many miniatures dated 1496; and the *Bustan* by Sa'adi in the Khedivial Library at Cairo has one miniature signed by Bihzad dated 1488. See F. R. Martin, "Two Portraits by Behzad, the Greatest Painter of Persia", *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 15, no. 73 (April 1909), 2-8.

⁷ David J. Roxburgh, "Kamal al-Din Bihzad and Authorship in Persianate Painting", *Muqarnas* 17 (2000), 119-146; Olimpiade Gallerkina, "On Some Miniatures Attributed to Bihzad in the Leningrad Collection", *Ars Orientalis* 8 (1970), 121-138.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁹ "The artist is remarkable for his deep psychological insight which enables him to surpass the stereotype canons of medieval miniatures and endow the heroes and heroines of medieval Persian literature with rich spiritual and emotional life." See Gallerkina, "On Some Miniatures Attributed to Bihzad", 121-138.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

role. Bihzad's palette introduced earthy tones, shades and tints that went beyond the primary and restricted secondary colour palette that had dominated Persian painting since the early fifteenth century.¹¹

Corresponding with the importance placed on valuing the individual in Sufi thought and responding to the new shifts in literature sweeping the Timurid courts during the last decades of the fifteenth century, Bihzad developed the genre of portraiture, in true likeness, for the first time in Persian manuscript art. Bihzad is known to have illustrated portraits of poets Nizami (these were imaginary) and Jami in several folios attributed to him. In addition, a portrait of Sultan Husain Bayqara is credited to Bihzad. The sultan's portrait is recognizable by his physiognomy and costume, which was made into a motif and used several times in many compositions illustrated by Bihzad.

The new ways of expressing emotions and subjectivity in images developed by Bihzad was an exception in a tradition where an artist had to apprentice and train under an *ustād* (master) for several years, following in the Persian tradition of the transmission of knowledge from a master to his disciple.¹² Thus, any innovation by an individual artist had to remain confined within the canon of Persian painting. Therefore, Bihzad's pictorial explorations and innovations could only occur in an intellectual and artistic milieu where new ideas had permeated the social and cultural fabric under the connoisseurship and patronage of Sultan Husain Bayqara.

The Reign of Sultan Husain Bayqara (r.1470-1505)

Sultan Husain Bayqara was the great-great-grandson of Timur, descended in the line of Umar Sheikh. He was the last Timurid ruler to rule from Herat over the lands that had been conquered and consolidated by Timur. Husain Bayqara had overthrown the Turkoman rulers who had gained advantage over Herat and re-established the glories of Timurid culture, by re-entering the city of

¹¹ Roxburgh, "Kamal al-Din Bihzad", 121.

¹² Mika Natif has elaborated on the traditional transmission of knowledge from a master to his pupil in context of emulating the works of earlier masters and the use of European models in Mughal paintings in her book. See Mika Natif, *Mughal Occidentalism: Artistic Encounters between Europe and Asia at the Courts of India, 1580-1630*, *Studies in Persian Cultural History*, Vol. 15 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), 70-84.

his birth in 1469.¹³ His chronicler, Daulat Shah, endowed Sultan Husain with the heroic virtues of the ancient kings of Persian literature: the courage of Rostam, Isfandiyar and Behram, and the wisdom and justice of Jamshed and Khusrau.¹⁴

Sultan Husain Bayqara belonged to the same brand of princely class in medieval Central Asia who had trained under various literary and artistic masters. He was cognizant of the sciences, the rational, poetry, calligraphy and illustration. Under Sultan Husain's patronage, literary society flourished in late fifteenth century Herat to an extraordinary degree.¹⁵ The royal court was the literary setting for several poets: Jami, Sultan Husain's viziers, Ahmed Suhaili al-Kashifi and Mir Ali Sher Nawai, Asafi and Hatifi (Jami's nephew).¹⁶ Sultan Husain himself was a poet and wrote in Chagatay Turkish. The day-to-day affairs of the court were conducted by his minister Ali Sher Nawai, one of the finest Chagatay-Turkish poet of his day.¹⁷

Acknowledging the cultural flowering at the royal court, presided over by his cousin, Babur, writing in his memoirs noted:

The whole habitable world has not such a town as Heri had become under sultan Husain Mirza, whose orders and efforts had increased its splendour and beauty as ten to one, rather as twenty to one.¹⁸

Sultan Husain Bayqara's reign ushered in peace after several years of strife in the region, allowing the arts to flourish. This flowering of the arts is reflected in some of the finest illustrated manuscripts commissioned by Sultan Husain after his victory over Herat. It is said that even before he had triumphantly entered Herat, he had commissioned an illustrated copy of Sharaf al-Din's *Zafarnama*, in anticipation of his victory.¹⁹ Some of the folios of this manuscript are attributed to Bihzad.

As noted by Sims, the illustrated manuscripts produced during Sultan Husain's reign are distinct creations.²⁰ The subjects chosen for

¹³ Eleanor Sims, Boris I. Marshak, and Ernst J. Grube, *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and its Sources* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 57.

¹⁴ Michael Barry, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzad of Herat (1465-1535)* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), 141.

¹⁵ Sims et al., *Peerless Images*, 57.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Barry, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam*, 146.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Sims et al., *Peerless Images*, 57.

²⁰ Ibid.

the illustration in these volumes were very different from princely manuscripts of the first half of the century. Some of these themes, notes Sims, had never been illustrated before, in which the life and reign of sultans in courtly settings were abandoned for stunning images of ordinary men.²¹

Scholars have argued that the Timurid efflorescence was not based upon an attempt to revive the classics rather it was a reworking of twelfth-century humanism.²² Sultan Husain Bayqara's patronage of poets, scholars and philosophers was a sign of the intellectual mobilization that stepped beyond classical models and explored new directions in literature and the arts. Emotions about love and longing gave primacy to the individual and his interior life and often pit the individual against society. In addition, the widely spoken Chagatay-Turki was introduced as a literary alternative to the official use of Persian. These changes, though subtle, signalled the peaceful reign of Sultan Husain Bayqara and his interest in the arts, which resulted in a more humanist approach to the existing social order, compared to earlier textual reliance on myths, legends and histories of the ancient Persian world.

The new intellectual elite at Sultan Husain's court relied more on the words of poets, philosophes and writers than on the words of prophets and religious orthodox Muslims. This shift, considering the words of scholarly men of different disciplines equally important compared with the words of the prophet, gained legitimacy under the Timurid sultans.

Formulation of the Individual in Sufi Thought

The emergence of the concepts of selfhood, personhood, identity and subjectivity in the *Isbrāqī* tradition may have been one of the reasons that fifteenth-century Persian poets sought new ways of portraying the subjectivity of key actors in their contemporary works. Thus, briefly tracing this literary development that emerged in the writings of early Persian poets and philosophers may help us consider new ways of recognizing, perceiving and critiquing human qualities and emotions explored in the writings of later poets.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Linda T. Darling, "The Renaissance and the Middle East", in Guido Ruggiero (ed.), *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 58.

The *ʿIsbrāqī* philosophy, identified with Shiʿa thought, was promoted by various thinkers of early medieval Central Asia and was in line with the theology promoted by Avicenna (980-1037)²³. Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240)²⁴ made the idea of the Perfect Man the central theme of Sufism. The Ibn al-Arabi school concerned itself with the issue of the transference of light from the divine to man, who in turn radiated this light to the rest of the world. This *al-insān al-kāmil*, or the “Perfect Man”, was favoured by God and received God’s light, which led him to perfection. In developing the theory of the Perfect Man, al-Arabi articulated the theory of *wahdat al-wajūd*, “the oneness of being” and discussed the issue of oneness through the metaphor of the mirror. Thus, light of God was the mirror in which the Perfect Man was reflected, displaying divine attributes likened to God. Therefore, if the Perfect Man was a reflection of God, then there existed no distinction between God and the Perfect Man. When an individual understood that there was no separation between him and God, then he embarked upon the path of ultimate oneness.²⁵

Along with *al-insān al-kāmil*, another important term to understand is the Arabic word “*nafs*” which can also be translated as “soul, psyche, spirit, mind, life, person”, etc.²⁶ Others have defined the term as “the reality of what it means to be human, and its principle is *nafs*”.²⁷ According to medieval thinkers, *nafs* was not located in the body, but was a separate substance that acted independent of the body.²⁸ *Nafs*, then, corresponded to the animating principle of the body, or the immortal aspect of man’s being. Therefore, the word, *nafs*, referred closely to the idea of ‘soul’.²⁹

In the intellectual and culturally sophisticated court of Sultan Husain Bayqara, Nur ad-Din Abd ar-Rahman Jami (1414-1492)

²³ Avicenna was a Persian polymath, regarded as one of the Islamic Golden Age’s most significant thinkers and writers.

²⁴ Ibn ʿArabī was an Arab-Andalusian Sunni scholar of Islam, Sufi mystic, poet and philosopher.

²⁵ See William C. Chittick, “Ebn al-ʿArabi Mohyi-al- Din Abu ʿAbd-Allah Mohammad Taʿi Hatemi.” *Encyclopedia Iranica* (1996).

²⁶ William C. Chittick, “The Perfect Man as the Prototype of the Self in the Sufism of Jami”, *Studia Islamica* 49 (1979), 135.

²⁷ Sajjad H. Rizvi, “Selfhood and Subjectivity in Safavid Philosophy: Some Notes on Mir Ġiyāṭuddīn Manṣūr Daštakī”, *Isbraq: Islamic Philosophy Yearbook* 5 (Moscow: Nauka-Vostochnaya Literatura, 2014), 104.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Chittick, “The Perfect Man”, 135.

further elaborated upon the al-Arabi school of Sufi thought. In Jami's definition of man's relation to universe, man represented the microcosm (*alam i- saghir*) mirroring the reflection of macrocosm (*alam i-kabir*).³⁰ Only through the existence of man could God gaze upon unity in multiplicity, as God represented unity and the world symbolized multiplicity. In man, both aspects of unity and multiplicity were combined to reflect the "oneness of being" or unity in multiplicity. Thus, man represented the divine knowledge without which the infinity of God would be limited. According to early medieval thinkers of the Ibn 'Arabī school—without man, there would be no world.³¹

This notion of the "oneness of being" is a significant philosophical shift as it places man and creation at an equipoise where man is as important to god as god to man. As we shall see, this notion also advances the trope of "humanism"—a Western cultural pattern of thought that attaches prime importance to the autonomy of the human/individual rather than divine or supernatural. The centrality of the individual then privileges thought or action in which human values and dignity predominate. Examining the interdependence between the human and the universe, what seems significant here is that the microcosm is not a reduced version of the macrocosm, of lesser significance. Instead, it is deeply valuable.

In Sufi discourse, universe and man were regarded as copies of sacred texts, and these texts themselves served as the prototype for other types of literature. Thus, poetry, a category of text created by humans, gained legitimacy as the reflection of sacred texts, represented by the Quran.³² This poem written by Jami significantly articulates the value of a book and the importance it enjoyed in medieval times.

³⁰ Ibid., 145.

³¹ Ibid., 153.

³² In the words of Persian poet Nizami (twelfth century) writing in the *Mahzān al-asrār* (A Repository of Mysteries), poets, having gained access to the supreme Word in an act of meditation, were capable, just as prophets were, of revealing the meaning and command of the word in their works. See V. I. Braginsky, "Universe - Man - Text; The Sufi Concept of Literature (with special reference to Malay Sufism)", *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 149, 2 (1993), 207. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003124>.

کتاب
انیسن کنج تنهایی کتاب است
فروغ صبح دانایی کتاب است
بود بی مزد و منت اوستادیی
ز دانش بخشدت هر دم گشادیی
درونش همچو غنچه از ورق پر
به قیمت هر ورق زان یک طبق در
ز یک رنگی همه هم روی و هم پشت
گر ایشان را زند کس بر لب انگشت
به تقریر لطایف لب گشایند
هزاران گوهر معنی نمایند
گهی اسرار قرآن باز گویند
گه از قول پیمبر راز گویند
گهت از رفتگان تاریخ خوانند
گر از آینده اخبارت رسانند

The Book

When you are alone and cornered, the book is your friend
The book is wise, like the dawn, radiant
A teacher, without wages and obligations
Who bestows knowledge on pupils, and helps to find solutions
Enclosed, like petals of unopened buds
Every page priceless, like a tray of pearls
Ever unchanging, unwavering, from start to finish
If ever struck upon, by a finger upon its lip
A speaking oracle, imparting words of wisdom
Conveying pearls of meanings, in tens and thousands
At times, the secrets of the Quran, it speaks
At times, the sayings of the Prophet, it reveals
At times, the histories of the deceased are told
At times, the future events are foretold.³³

According to Jami, books served several function—first, he situates the book as a companion and a true friend—one who would

³³ Translation of Jami's poetry, *Kitab*, by the author, with guidance from Prof. Syed Akhtar Husain, presented at the seminar, "600th Birth Anniversary of Abdur Rahman JAMI", hosted by the Embassy of Tajikistan at India International Centre, New Delhi, 27 November 2014.

never forsake you; second, the book was a compendium of wisdom and knowledge; the ideas contained in the book had permanence—they were constant, unlike individuals, whose ideas and emotions were subject to change; and most importantly, they served the task of equally presenting the words of prophets, the histories of great kings as well as predictions about future developments in politics, culture, health, science and society.

The emphasis on the multiple functions of a book, articulated by Jami in the fifteenth century, strikes us as very meaningful. It suggests that the book was not only a source of religious pedagogy but also a source of information and knowledge about other disciplines. The significance of words carrying thoughts and ideas of philosophers, poets and scholars, along with the words of prophets, was a discernible shift that is observed in the scholarly and literary works of imperial poets at the court of Sultan Husain Bayqara.

New Artistic Shift in Persian Painting

The extent of eminence and prestige enjoyed by medieval Persian poets is exemplified in a painting illustrated by Qasim Ali in 1485.³⁴ In the painting, *Nizami's Shade Welcomes the Poets Jami and Nawai in the Dream Garden*,³⁵ we are offered a glimpse of the literary and aesthetic atmosphere that pervaded the late Timurid court in Herat. The scene corresponds to an oneirological experience of Mir Ali Sher Nawai. The figures of great Persian poets (past and current) are arranged in hierarchy, with the figure of Nizami (1141-1209) seated prominently in the centre.

The composition of Qasim Ali is poetic and lyrical. Recognised as a portrait artist, Ali carefully illustrated the constellation of poets, each with distinct particularity and individuality. The most important figure is that of Nizami, seated in a cluster of three men on a horizontal carpet set in a garden surrounded by flowering bushes and trees. Nizami, a twelfth-century Persian poet, was respected as a

³⁴ Qasim Ali was a portrait artist (*chebra gushay*) and Bihzad's pupil at the court of the Timurid sultan, Husain Bayqara, in the fifteenth century. It is acknowledged that he was the third greatest pupil and "nearly the equal" of Bihzad himself.

³⁵ The image is published in Barry, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam*, 68. Image details: Nizami's Shade Welcomes the Poets Jami and Nawai in the Dream Garden, from the text: *Sadd -i-Iskander* (Alexander's Wall), author: Mir Ali Sher Nawai, artist: Qasim Ali, belonging to Timurid: Herat, dated AH 890 (1485–86 AD), preserved at the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS Elliott 339, fol 95v.

learned scholar and master of a lyrical and sensuous style, and credited with creating a bridge between pre-Islamic and Islamic Iran. In the composition, the figure of Nizami is seated to the left, facing two men, Jami and Nawai. The posture of Nizami is upright, as he sits with his feet tucked under him, with both arms outstretched in greeting to welcome Jami, Herat's spiritual leader. The image of Nizami reflects the figure of an old man, with white beard and white turban, indexing scholarly pursuits. There is an assortment of books, a pen and an inkstand arranged in front of the three poets, further enhancing the literary mood reflected in this gathering of poets.

The seated figure of Jami is slightly bent forward towards Nizami, honouring the great poet in this imaginary meeting, located in a Timurid garden in springtime. Jami's one hand is raised towards Nawai, who is being introduced to Nizami. Nawai's head is bowed in reverence and his hands are covered beneath the long sleeves of his green *chappan*, a sign of utmost respect.³⁶ Nawai is shown here, as the disciple of Jami, as the latter's hands are left uncovered, a sign recognized as a mark of higher rank. However, both Jami and Nawai acknowledged the absolute superiority of the long-deceased Nizami, whose ideas and narratives were adapted by poets in fifteenth-century Herat. They are shown seated closest to him.

Seated on Nizami's right, upon a carpet placed diagonally, is the fourteenth-century Indian poet, Amir Khusrau Dehlavi. Khusrau was a Sufi musician, poet and scholar from India, who wrote his *Khamasa*, challenging the virtuosity of Nizami's epic of the same title. He too, is shown with his hands covered respectfully, seated with his feet tucked under him. A book is placed before his figure. Seated next to Khusrau, is the figure of Sa'di Shirazi, a twelfth-century Persian poet and prose writer, recognized as one of the greatest poets of the classical literary tradition. He is shown conversing with the figure of Firdausi, the tenth-century author of the epic, *Shahnama* and celebrated as one of the greatest authors in world literature. The figure of Sanai is seated next to Firdausi, holding a book. The figures of Anwari and Khaqani are shown seated across a flowing brook with flowering bushes, on the right of the composition. Standing deferentially, almost like an attendant, behind the seated figure of Nawai, is Hasan of Delhi.

³⁶ Barry, *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam*, 254.

Qasim Ali's composition of an image, mirroring an imagination, may reflect the Platonian concept of an image being the copy of a copy—in the way the artist has copied an imagined idea, first imagined in a dream by Nawai and then communicated to Qasim Ali. Apart from the imagined constellation of great poets from Iran, Central Asia and India belonging from the tenth to the fifteenth centuries, shown with particularity and distinctness, the subjectivity of the poets is accentuated by the display of selective books arranged before them. The inclusion of great literary works, associated with distinguished poets shown in the composition (who no longer exist), alludes to the circulation and diffusion of ideas, thoughts and philosophies contained in them (which continue to exist in present times). Thus, the image could be said to function as *bilderfahrzeug*,³⁷ indexing the amalgamation of great poets from past and present, gathered under a night sky with a golden crescent moon celebrating the flowering and circulation of knowledge, imagined as a distinct reality in Nawai's oneirological experience.

The reading of this extraordinary image allows us to propose that poets belonging to the fifteenth century trained on the routes by which knowledge of the past was acquired and assimilated into contemporary times, thereby shedding a reflected light on both the poets of the past as well as those belonging to current times. Notions of individuality and subjectivity explored by Persian poets, both past and current to the times, impacted portrait-making too, as evidenced by portraits-images of poets illustrated by Qasim Ali. This trend was the result of a combined expression of the gathering of poets, scholars, philosophers and artists who valued Sufi ideals and found royal patronage, enabling them to communicate their vision in the new literature and art that emerged and flourished during the fifteenth century in Central Asia.

Now, we turn our attention to the migration of ideas on individuality and subjectivity from Central Asia to the Indian sub-continent and the significant role that Sufi thought played in Mughal portraiture. It must be emphasised that in imitating the expressive devices of both literature and the visual arts initiated by poets and artists from the earlier Timurid period, Mughal artists were inserting

³⁷ 'Bilderfahrzeuge', literally meaning *image vehicles*, is a term, coined by the German art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929). In the context of the particular image, it refers to the creative expression of cultural as well as transcultural memory.

themselves into an existing tradition, which included the present with the past.

Selfhood and Subjectivity in Mughal Portraits

The Mughals shared their way of life with the Timurid sultans in Central Asia, and upon their arrival into the Indian subcontinent, sought their ancestral literary and artistic heritage for determining individual portrait-personalities of their ancestors and themselves in illustrated historical manuscripts. Continuing in the existing tradition of portraiture explored by Bihzad and his school of artists in Central Asian manuscript painting, Indian artists came under the influence of the “Bihzadian effect”. Paintings illustrated by Bihzad, which were already in the Mughal library, were thus, available to Mughal artists for scrutiny and imitation.

Bihzad’s effect on Mughal artists was not merely reflected in imitations of his works. Mughal artists were aware of portrait-images, drawn from life, of Sultan Husain Bayqara and other dignitaries of the Timurid court at Herat by Bihzad.³⁸ Bihzad’s innovation may have triggered the practice of making portraits from life by Persian masters too, who were directly trained by the old and infirm Bihzad at Tabriz.³⁹ These Persian artists, when they arrived in India with Humayun, would have been keen to introduce the practice of ‘actual’ portraits drawn from life of emperors and the diverse men occupying

³⁸ The practice of assembling albums containing portraits of kings, noblemen and holy men; paintings of single episodes from Persian literature and specimens of calligraphy alternating with miniatures were quite common in palaces of Timurid and Safavid rulers. These albums or *murraqas* were used as private picture galleries. See Gallerkina, “On Some Miniatures Attributed to Bihzad”, 127.

³⁹ After the death of Sultan Bayqara in 1506, the Timurid empire declined. Bihzad left Herat and went into the service of the new Safavid ruler of Persia, Shah Ismail, who was a lover of art and who favored him. After the death of Shah Ismail in 1524, Bihzad continued to work as a court painter under his successor, Shah Tahmasp. It is known from the writings of contemporary sources, Mirza Haider and Dost Muhammad that Bihzad’s influence in the atelier of Shah Tahmasp turned around the formulaic structure of Persian miniature painting into a dynamic model. Artists like Mir Musavvir, Aqa Mirak, Dost Muhammad and Mir Sayyid Ali, began experimenting with portraiture under Bihzad’s guidance and introduced remarkable delicacy in the treatment of rocks, landscapes, human figures—all executed with heightened drama and emotion. In addition, the Safavid artists began introducing naturalism as may be seen in the paintings of the school of Bihzad at Herat. See Armenag Sakisian, “The School of Bihzad and the Miniaturists, Aqa Mirak and Mir Musavvir”, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 68, no. 396 (1936), 81-83, 85.

various offices at the Mughal court.

Beginning with the reign of Akbar (r. 1556-1605), we are introduced to recognizable portraits of emperors and their courtiers marking distinctness and verisimilitude in the features of historical men in pre-modern India. In the case of representing portraits of Mughal ancestors, the artist developed prototypes of particular rulers like Timur, Babur and Humayun, who became recognizable images even though they were created by the artist's imagination, sometimes guided by the written descriptions of their particular features in contemporary sources.

Another unique feature of portraits of emperors drawn by Mughal artists is the representation of youthful, middle-aged and mature portraits, denoting the passage of time and the aging of their sovereign. The passage of time represented upon the emperor's portrait finds resonance in the Sufi ontologies of the self, arising from Neo-platonic and Aristotelian philosophies explored by Jami⁴⁰ at the court of Husain Bayqara. For experiencing the concept of *Nafsīya*, regarded as selfhood and its relationship to the body, the Sufi philosopher argues that the body grows and changes and is constantly in the state of becoming something else.⁴¹ Therefore, the medieval artist was already aware of the different stages that the body underwent—youth, adulthood and aging—in order to comprehend the idea of selfhood and subjectivity discussed by early medieval Sufi philosophers. Migrating to the Mughal court, these ideas were claimed, absorbed and expressed upon the body of the emperor, in various folios of historical manuscripts, illustrated by contemporary artists. Thus, portraits of Akbar in the historical and biographical manuscripts reveal certain distinctive characteristics in the emperor's personality, which require closer examination and engagement with the rich literary discourse prevalent during the times.

These poetics between text and image led to a shift in the position of the individual/human in the intellectual history of the

⁴⁰ Originally interpreted by Avicenna and subsequently by the School of Ibn 'Arabī and other Sufi schools and their thinkers. See Sajjad H. Rizvi, "The Existential Breath of *al-Rahmān* and the Munificent Grace of *al-Rahīm*. The Tafsīr *Surat al-Fatīha* of Jami and the School of Ibn 'Arabī, *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 8, no. 1 (2006), 58-87.

⁴¹ If one were identical with the body or a part thereof, the "I" ness of the person would be in constant flux. But personhood and identity require stability in the perceiving faculty. For a detailed study of the concept of *Nafs* and context of subjecthood and identity. Ibid.

times. As I hope to show with a detailed analysis of a posthumous portrait of Akbar illustrated during the reign of Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), this shift was crucial for the crystallization of concepts of the individual—which produced a need for the depiction of individual lives and personalities. European naturalism provided the means to fulfil a desire that had already arisen in the Timurid milieu. The techniques offered by European art found fertile ground in Mughal India because of the convergence of earlier lineages of thinking on the subject of individuals, self and selfhood in medieval Persian literature.

Image of a Mole on Akbar's Nose

The portrait-image of Akbar is observed in many illustrated historical manuscripts produced during the emperor's reign (1556-1605). It is best represented in the folios of the *Akbarnama*⁴² (Book of Akbar). The folio, *Akbar Receiving his Younger Brother Mirza Muhammad Hakim* (Fig. 1), painted by Govardhan from the second *Akbarnama*,⁴³ shows the portrait of Akbar drawn in his likeness. Govardhan's painting is one of the finest examples of the *nim qalam*⁴⁴ style. The sheer beauty of draftsmanship, delicacy of tint which emphasizes volume and depth of every figure and object, and the artist's mastery over verisimilitude displayed on the portraits of the emperor, his brother and other members of the emperor's coterie, makes this folio, a masterpiece to behold.

⁴² The *Akbarnama* is the biography of emperor Akbar, written by Abul Fazl between 1589 and 1596. It traced his genealogy, gave an account of his ancestors, and chronicled the emperor's life from childhood through most of his reign. As the text was being written, it was also illustrated into dazzling compositions that were assembled into an imperial manuscript.

⁴³ The folios of the second *Akbarnama* is shared between the British Library, which owns volume I of the text and the Chester Beatty Library, which owns volume II and part of volume III.

⁴⁴ *Nim qalam* is a style of illustration, which emerged during the last decade of the 16th century at the Mughal court. The artist drew the image with fine brushwork, and restricted his palette to shades and tones of limited colors, like brown, green and red.

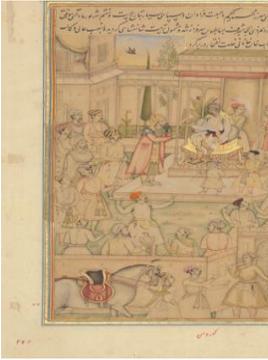


Figure 1. Akbar Receiving His Younger Brother Mirza Muhammad Hakim

Second *Akbarnama*, Artist: Govardhan

Mughal 1600-1605, Chester Beatty Library. In 03.49

Artwork in the public domain, photograph provided by Chester Beatty Library https://viewer.cbl.ie/viewer/image/In_03_49/2/LOG_0000/

The artist displays his dexterity in every aspect of the composition. The architecture shown at the back of the seated emperor, and on the top register, is very finely executed. All lines recede to a single point perspective. The curtain, held up by a string and bunched towards the right in the upper story wall, is rendered with fine shading using the technique of stippling, adding depth and volume to the folds of the fabric. The attention to detail by Govardhan is exemplified in the patterns of the carpet placed below the throne. Tiny colourful birds are shown flying around the emperor's feet, as if his divine presence beckoned these little birds, like honey bees attracted to a flower's nectar.

Below a rolled-up red canopy, Akbar is shown seated on a six-sided Timurid throne, painted with delicate details that include gold patterns engraved upon the sides. The emperor is dressed in a white transparent muslin *jama* that reaches elegantly below his knees. The *jama* is tied on the right, embellished with white and gold tassels. A black and red sash, with tiny *bandhni* patterns (a tie-and-die fabric dyeing technique, popular even today), is wrapped around the emperor's waist, fringed with gold patterned edges and placed lightly over his folded leg. Ornamented with minimum jewels, Akbar is shown with two richly engraved daggers tucked into a golden cloth tied at the waist.

The portrait-features of Mirza Hakim, shown in three-fourth profile, has been rendered with utmost fineness (See Fig. 2). His eyes look up towards Akbar, whose eyes are focused into the distance. Each strand of the mirza's beard is painted individually with light and dark tones, resulting in a thick textured beard. It is, however, the portrait-image of Akbar that demands our special attention (Fig. 3). A three-fourth profile with Mongol features, a drooping moustache and a soft double-layered chin indicates Akbar's portrait, recognizable

from earlier folios. However, besides the stunning artwork, the artist's inclusion of a significant anatomical detail on Akbar's face, allows me to suggest that Govardhan's painting could be honouring Jahangir's description of his father, in his memoirs, the *Tuzuk-i Jahangiri*.

Jahangir ascended the throne in 1605, after Akbar's death. He began writing his memoirs during the first twelve years of his reign, in which he described the physical appearance, particularly the facial features of Akbar, in his own words:

In his august personal appearance, he was of middle height, but inclining to be tall; he was of the hue of wheat; his eyes and eyebrows were black, and his complexion rather dark than fair; he was lion-bodied, with a broad chest, and his hands and arms were long. On the left side of his nose, he had a fleshy mole, very agreeable in appearance, of the size of half a pea. Those skilled in the science of physiognomy considered this mole a sign of great prosperity and exceeding good fortune.⁴⁵

Jahangir describes a particular feature of his father's face, which, if the emperor had not described it in the above passage, would not perhaps, have been known to us.⁴⁶ Obviously, everybody who saw Akbar (including his artists) must have noted the mole on the emperor's face. However, it is possible to argue that the artist introduced this essential detail on the emperor's portrait only after Jahangir drew attention to it, and spoke of it as a symbol of auspiciousness.

⁴⁵ Alexander Rogers and Henry Beveridge, *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri or Memoirs of Jahangir*, trans. Alexander Rogers (New Delhi: Munishiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1978), 34.

⁴⁶ During a visit to the Chester Beatty Library, the author was able to examine two original folios from the second *Akbarnama* and discover the distinct mole on Akbar's facial features, both painted by Govardhan. The author is not aware of any other extant portraits of Akbar, which shows this prominent anatomical detail on his face.



Figure 2 Close up of Mirza Muhammad Hakim



Figure 3 Close up of Akbar's portrait with a distinctive mole on the left side of his nose

The mole has a very important symbolism in Persian literature. The mole was significant in Sufi thought as it symbolized the Divine Essence in its transcendental aspect. In Sufi poetics, the face corresponded to the Essence in its immanent aspect (i.e. the Essence with its attributes and names), the eyes and the lips represented attributes of majesty and beauty respectively, the down on the face corresponded to the created world and the hair or curls to the sensual world.⁴⁷ Humans and their attributes representing the microcosmic could therefore, also correspond to the Quran, described as the macrocosmic aspect.

Your face is like a Quran copy, without correction and mistake,
which the pen of fate has written exclusively from musk.
Your eyes and your mouth are verses and the dot for stopping,
your eyebrows the *madda* (for lengthening the *alif*—first letter of the
alphabet)
The eyelashes the signs for declension, the mole and the down
letters and dots.⁴⁸

In addition to the interpretation of the divine aspect of the occurrence of a mole on an enlightened face, the mole appears as symbol of physiognomic beauty in medieval Persian poetry—so graceful, that all the beautiful features of the face coalesce into the

⁴⁷ Braginsky, "Universe - Man - Text", 203-204.

⁴⁸ Quoted from Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 413.

mole. Exalting the beauty of the city of Shiraz, and comparing it to a mole on the face of his beloved, Hafiz the Persian poet, declares:⁴⁹

اگر آن ترک شیرازی بدست آرد دل مار
به خال هندویش بخشم سمرقند و بخارا را
(حافظ)

Just for one glimpse of the mole on my beloved's face (the beloved city Shiraz)

I would readily give up the splendours of Hindustan, Samarqand and Bukhara.

Legend has it, that when Timur asked Hafiz how he dared write a poem gifting away the great wealth of the cities of Hindustan, Samarqand and Bukhara, which Timur had conquered and beautified, for the sake of a gaze on Shiraz, the poet's beloved home; Hafiz, with great wit had responded, "That is why I am the poor fakir, Hafiz!"⁵⁰

The mole on the left side of Akbar's nose was a marker of God-gifted physiognomy corresponding to the attributes of the Perfect Man stated in medieval Persian texts. Jahangir, it may be argued, wanted to highlight his father's divine status by describing this very important physiognomic symbol of beauty, grace and prosperity, observed on his father's face. Identifying with Sufi thought, even though it is known, Jahangir had engaged with Hindu and Jain monks and holy men and their philosophical and religious texts, he chose to cite the poetics of fifteen-century Sufi poets to mark the auspiciousness of his father's individual features, for memorialising the posthumous image of his father.

Concluding Remarks

The Mughals shared their way of life with Timurid sultans in Central Asia. Upon their arrival into the Indian subcontinent, the emperors sought ways in which they could claim, emulate and project the glory, prestige and cultural efflorescence of their ancestors, during their own reign in India (Hindustan). The first Mughal emperor, Babur, was introduced to the refinements of literary and artistic

⁴⁹ I am grateful to Prof. Syed Akhtar Husain, Professor, Department of Persian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, for drawing this Persian verse to my notice during a conversation in February 2016.

⁵⁰ There are several such anecdotes about the witty responses of Hafiz, which enchanted Timur. Hafiz became the *amir's* poet laureate, despite his alleged critique of Timur's reign.

explorations experienced at the Timurid court of Sultan Husain Bayqara, before he arrived in the east and conquered India. He was known to have brought with him several Timurid manuscripts, including illustrated ones containing paintings by Bihzad, that were later inscribed with signatures of Mughal emperors, acknowledging and validating the value of the calligrapher and artist who produced the masterpieces. The second Mughal emperor, Humayun, too, contributed to the Mughal cultural capital by bringing Safavid artists to India, some of who were trained under the legendary Bihzad. These master artists brought with them the technique and knowledge of making distinctive portraits and were credited with the training and mentoring of local artists, who were initiated into the Persian way of painting.⁵¹

During the reign of Akbar, a project to illustrate the histories of the Turko-Mongol dynasties was undertaken. The historical manuscripts that were produced included the *Jami al-Tawarikh* (history of the Mongols), the *Tarikh-e Khandaniye-Timuriya* (history of the Timurids), several copies of the *Baburnama* (memoir of Babur), the *Humayunnama* (biography of Humayun) and three known copies of the *Akbarnama* (the life and reign of Akbar). Thus, a need for distinctness and particularity for distinguishing the portraits of various rulers of the Turko-Mongol dynasties could have arisen, due to which Mughal artists may have sought the artistic practices explored by Bihzad and his school of artists for determining individual portrait-personalities of Mughal emperors and their ancestors. In this regard, the introduction to techniques of verisimilitude achieved by European artists, observed in the prints and paintings which were brought by Jesuit missionaries to Akbar's court, may have provided the suitable vehicle for Mughal artists to either transpose or emulate into their own artworks.

Thus, we can summarize that the intention of Mughal artists was not to "copy" the European way of painting, but rather, to apply a selective use of European naturalism for indexing the individuality of their patron, setting him apart from other rulers. Regarding the inclusion of aspects of subjectivity observed upon imperial portraits,

⁵¹ For an exhaustive reading of portraits made by Safavid artists, see Laura E. Parodi, "Tracing the Rise of Mughal Portraiture: The Kabul Corpus, c. 1545–55" in Crispin Branfoot (ed.), *Portraiture in South Asia since the Mughals: Art, Representation and History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 49-71.

it can be argued that the Mughal interest in European way of painting was not “caused” by taking over a European cultural pattern (“humanism”), but rather by a parallel Persian approach to subjectivity. Thus, the stunning image of the portrait of Akbar shown with a mole upon his nose, could be said to exemplify the notion of subjectivity observed in Mughal portraiture in response to Persian Sufism, and the European mode of painting as a suitable vehicle for expressing this.

Bibliography

- Barry, Michael. *Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzād of Herat (1465-1535)*. Paris: Flammarion, 2004.
- Beach, Milo Cleveland. *The Imperial Image: Paintings for the Mughal Court*. Washington D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1981.
- Braginsky, V. I. “Universe - Man - Text; The Sufi Concept of Literature (with Special Reference to Malay Sufism)”, *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land- en volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 149, 2, 1993. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003124>.
- Chittick, William C. “Ebn al-‘Arabi Mohyi-al- Din Abu ‘Abd-Allah Mohammad Ta’i Hatemi.” *Encyclopedia Iranica*, 1996.
- Chittick, William C. “The Perfect Man as the Prototype of the Self in the Sufism of Jami”, *Studia Islamica* 49, 1979.
- Darling, Linda T. “The Renaissance and the Middle East”, in Guido Ruggiero (ed.), *A Companion to the Worlds of the Renaissance*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.
- Gallerkina, Olimpiade. “On Some Miniatures Attributed to Bihzad in the Leningrad Collection”, *Ars Orientalis* 8, 1970.
- Martin, F. R. “Two Portraits by Behzad, the Greatest Painter of Persia”, *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 15, no. 73, April 1909.
- Natif, Mika. *Mughal Occidentalism: Artistic Encounters between Europe and Asia at the Courts of India, 1580-1630, Studies in Persian Cultural History*, Vol. 15. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017.
- Parodi, Laura E. “Tracing the Rise of Mughal Portraiture: The Kabul Corpus, c. 1545–55” in Crispin Branfoot (ed.), *Portraiture in South Asia since the Mughals: Art, Representation and History*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2018.

- Rice, Yael. "The Emperor's Eye and the Painter's Brush: The Rise of the Mughal Court Artist, c.1546-1627". Ph.D. Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2011.
- Rizvi, Sajjad H. "Selfhood and Subjectivity in Safavid Philosophy: Some Notes on Mīr Ġiyāṭuddīn Maṣṣūr Daštakī", *Isbraq: Islamic Philosophy Yearbook* 5. Moscow: Nauka-Vostochnaya Literatura, 2014.
- "The Existential Breath of *al-Rahmān* and the Munificent Grace of *al-Rabīm*: The Tafsīr *Sūrat al-Fātiha* of *Jāmi* and the School of Ibn 'Arabī", *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 8, no. 1, 2006.
- Rogers, Alexander and Beveridge, Henry. *The Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri or Memoirs of Jahangir*, trans. Alexander Rogers. New Delhi: Munishiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1978.
- Roxburgh, David J. "Kamal al-Din Bihzad and Authorship in Persianate Painting", *Muqarnas* 17, 2000.
- Sakisian, Armenag. "The School of Bihzad and the Miniaturists, Aqa Mirak and Mir Musavvir", *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 68, no. 396, 1936.
- Schimmel, Annemarie. *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1975.
- Sims, Eleanor., Marshak, Boris I., and Grube, Ernst J. *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and its Sources*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.