

# WOMEN AT THE MUGHAL COURT

## PERCEPTION & REALITY

What assumptions or questions do you have about the women depicted in the following nine paintings? What was life like in the *zenana* or women's quarters? How much freedom did they have? With our new online catalogue we are drawing attention to this under-explored area. We look at the fascinating lives and achievements of these women, and how they have been represented, or misrepresented.



## WOMEN AT THE MUGHAL COURT

### PERCEPTION & REALITY

When we look at cat. 1, 'A Princess is attended by her Women', one can imagine how such an image could be misinterpreted. For centuries, the women of the Mughal court and the space of the *zenana* (the women's quarters of a household) in particular have often been neglected by art historians and represented by European visitors and later writers and artists in Orientalist terms. This is the idea of the 'exotic' harem as a place of purely sensuous languor, where thousands of nubile young women are imprisoned and lead restricted lives as sex objects, full of jealousy and frustration. As we might expect, the truth is far more complex, rich, and surprising.

Certainly, as the wonderful details of cat. 1 attest, the highest-ranking women of this society enjoyed an extremely sophisticated luxury and beauty culture. Our princess' every need is being attended to: women on the left bring her fruit and a covered cup with a drink; one woman shampoos her feet to cool them while others hold a peacock, a *morchhal*, attend the incense burner, and sing and play on the *tambura* as musical accompaniment.

Cat. 2 gives another insight into their refined bathing habits, the advancement of which is attested to by the elaborate bath facilities in Agra, Delhi and the fortress at Lahore, with hot and cold running water. After bathing, they would be massaged with scented oils, which the handmaiden in cat. 2 is preparing, before dressing themselves in the layers of gossamer-thin fabrics the women wear in cat. 1, described as 'woven air'. Shah Jahan is said to have once reprimanded his daughter for indecent clothing, whereupon she demonstrated that she was in fact wearing seven layers of sheer fabric! (Schimmel, p. 159)

More than grooming and extravagance can be seen in cat. 1, however. Each lady has her task in this scene, and each her own attitude or level of sympathy with the princess: the woman holding up what appears to be a portrait of a man dressed in European costume has a particularly determined look, as if reprimanding her mistress for the passion which this portrait may represent. The foot rubber looks a little disgruntled with her task, while the musician gazes up at the princess almost in awe.



Cat. 1



As these details give us clues towards, the *zenana* was in fact a bustling, orchestrated and organised world where every woman knew her rank and purpose, where intelligent, cultured and articulate women were valued and most likely to advance. With no men involved in the internal running of the *zenana*, effectively a small city, it is no wonder that good administration, diplomacy, taste, and business sense were prized. There must indeed have been some intrigues and competition, but also warmth, companionship, female support and complicity in the midst of patriarchal society.

Some women in the imperial household are recorded as being as powerful as their husbands, occasionally having roles in government with the right to issue edicts, and acting as patrons of the arts, science, and architecture. The *zenana* was a multicultural space, and certainly not only for wives: it was for relatives seeking asylum from other countries, widows of important generals, Georgian and Portuguese servants, women soldiers acting as guards, unmarried relatives, respected grandmothers and aunts, Rajput princesses as well as children, attendants and tradeswomen of all kinds. Annemarie Schimmel gives a wonderful example of what a formidable lobby the imperial ladies could be, and how they understood their power as a group.



Cat. 2



Cat. 2



In 1606, when Prince Khusrau, on the advice of Mirza Aziz Koka, rebelled against his father, Jahangir, Salima sent a message to Jahangir:

“Majesty, all the ladies have assembled in the women’s quarters for the purpose of pledging their support for Mirza Aziz Koka. It would be better if you were to come here – if not, they will come to you!

There are accounts of similar threats.” (Schimmel 2004, p. 145)

The veneration of the mother was an important part of Mughal culture, rooted in Islam, and contemporary accounts are full of influential matrons, grandmothers, and nurses or amahs being called upon to resolve intergenerational disputes, offer advice, or indeed take charge of political or administrative strategy. Babur’s maternal grandmother Isan Daulat Begum ‘after the death of Babur’s father managed everything for her grandson, took over the administration of his Andijan territories and dealt with conspirators. “When it comes to tactics and strategy, there were few / Women like my grandmother Isan Daulat Begum. / She was intelligent and a good organizer. / Most arrangements were made according to her stipulations.” (Schimmel 2004, p. 144)

The architecture in cat. 3, a folio from the Chester Beatty *Tutinama*, or ‘Tales of the Parrot’, gives some idea of the decoration of the women’s quarters in the palace at Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar’s principal residence from 1571 to 1585. The small chamber is a simple red sandstone pavilion with painted dadoes, carved sandstone doors and a carpet on the floor. Outside the chamber the floor is covered in coloured tiles. According to Abu’l Fazl there were more than five thousand women in these quarters, each with her own apartment.

The *zenana* was often surrounded by gardens near running water, planted with various fragrant flowers and small trees, as we can see on the reverse of cat. 4, a partly coloured drawing of a Hindu lady lying on a bed on a terrace in the hot weather, while a fountain plays beyond. One attendant fans her while another shampoos her feet in an attempt to cool her down. Although the story of the *Tutinama* illustrated in cat. 3 (a parrot distracts his mistress from her lover with fascinating stories while her husband is away) is rooted in a patriarchal fear of female infidelity, it seems that, in reality, overly controlling husbands may not have fared so well. Schimmel writes of ‘one [16th century] *mansabdar* who kept 1,200 women in his harem, and every time he left to go to court, he sealed the fastenings of their trousers. But he seems to have been a unique case, and his women soon sealed his fate with poison. (Schimmel 2004, p. 156)

Unlike their European female contemporaries, Mughal women had control of their own wealth, and could also leave it to whomever they chose when they died. Princesses would have received a sizeable allowance, could own land and engage in trade, which many did very lucratively.





Cat. 5, 'Two ladies on a Terrace', offers an example of what these princesses did with their wealth. This moonlit scene of discussion (perhaps negotiation) between two high-ranking ladies, where one gives an ornament to the other, is inscribed in Persian as 'The picture of the Princess who repaired the *Tajganj* tomb.' *Tajganj* is the district of Agra, in which the Taj Mahal is located, in other words the Taj Mahal complex. This tomb is the celebrated mausoleum of Mumtaz Mahal, the favourite wife of Shah Jahan, so it seems that the begum in our picture may have funded the repair of the Taj Mahal.

There are numerous examples of such works being instigated and carried out by Mughal noblewomen: Maham Anaga, Akbar's chief nurse and an incredibly important political player in her own right, had one of the first Mughal mosques constructed in Delhi – the Khayr al-Manazil, opposite Purana Qila, the 'Old Fort'. Under Jahangir it was mainly women who encouraged the building of mosques, while the ruler himself didn't initiate these projects. His Rajput mother, a princess from the Amber family, was responsible for founding the Begum Shahi Mosque in Lahore (1611-14) and constructing a cascading fountain near the *idgah* in Bayana (1612) as well as being one of the most adventurous tradeswomen at court during her time as mother to the Emperor.

Perhaps as an extension of the respect for the mother ingrained in Mughal culture, there was an admiration for Mary, the Christian mother of Jesus, and certain other Christian female saints. Akbar gave his mother Hamida the title of Maryam Makani, 'occupying the place of the Virgin Mary', and her daughter-in law Manmati, aforementioned mother of Jahangir, was titled Maryam-i zamani, or 'Mary of her time'. There was a wide variety of Christian iconography circulating at the Mughal court from the second half of the 16th century, through European prints and illustrated bibles brought to India by travellers and Jesuit missionaries. Cat. 6, 'A Christian Saint holding a book', is a wonderfully fine example of how Mughal artists were inspired by this European imagery and adapted it to their own ends.

Our painted drawing is attributable to Basawan, one of the greatest masters of the imperial atelier, known for his artistic originality as well as his technical skill, who incorporated European ideas of characterization and perspective into his work. It was probably originally based on an allegorical figure from the *Puritas Regia* frontispiece in Plantin's Royal Bible (the Polyglot Bible), which also shows a female figure holding a book, with the halo and blue background added at a later date. Basawan has transformed his saint into an enigmatic figure of beauty and wisdom, with an elaborate costume of hybrid Indian and European features, holding an open book shaped like a Mughal or Persian manuscript rather than a European manuscript.



Cat. 6



Interestingly, the lady in cat. 7, based on a European print of a saint, is also holding a manuscript. The source may be an image of the learned St Catherine of Alexandria. Mughal women at court were among the most literate, well read and educated of their time, with access to the wide-ranging imperial library, which may explain the choice or attraction of these subjects. Shah Jahan's daughter Jahanara was an especially prominent and accomplished figure in this field. A writer and poet, she wrote a detailed and impassioned account of her experience in joining the Sufi path, and was also interested in music and architecture, holding her own court or salon, which became a centre for many distinguished luminaries of the period. The first lady of the empire after her mother Mumtaz Mahal's early death, she remained unmarried. Jahanara's niece, Zib un-nisa, daughter of Aurangzeb, also wrote poetry under the pseudonym *Makhfi* ('Hidden'), and was a patron of poets, writers, and building projects, as well as an advocate for incarcerated Maratha noblewomen.

Certainly, daily life for the noblewomen of the zenana was far from monotonous, albeit still limited in scope. If they were not involved in trade, or higher up the political food chain, they might have engaged in music, weaving, calligraphy, occasionally drawing or painting, hunting, polo playing, or other kinds of adventurous sport. They played board games together, such as chess. There are accounts of the ladies organising bazaars in the palace grounds for the ruler and his retinue, as well as other festivities such as weddings or celebrations for the birth of a prince. The emperor would often go on trips with the court ladies, to visit a spot of particular natural beauty or explore a certain part of the kingdom; they also went on pilgrimages to shrines or holy sites, and to visit relatives. At some points in the empire it was even the custom for noblewomen to watch battles at a certain distance, seated on elephants. It was an intensely social existence, with little privacy: at night a lady would have been watched and looked after by several female servants while she slept, and this extended even to lovemaking.

It was Jahangir's twentieth and favourite wife, Nur Jahan, who was to become undoubtedly the most famous and influential of all Mughal noblewomen. A widow in her thirties when she married the Emperor, her rise to power was swift and went beyond any illustrious empresses before or after her, thanks to what must have been incredible charisma, political talent, ambition and dynamism. Effectively, she was co-sovereign of the Empire for a large part of Jahangir's reign, with charge of the imperial seal and her own imperial orders, power to hold court when Jahangir was unwell or otherwise occupied, and coins minted in her name. On top of this, she wrote poetry, designed clothes, gardens and buildings, was a formidable rider and sportswoman, prolific trader and expert on textiles, and an extremely good shot, known for killing several man-eating tigers. Court historian Inayat Khan even wrote upon her death – 'she acquired such unbounded influence over His Majesty's mind that she seized the reigns of government, and assuming to herself the supreme civil and financial admin-



Cat. 7

istration of the realm, ruled with absolute authority till the conclusion of his reign.' (Pal 1989, p. 40).

Nur Jahan seems to have been an exception to more than one rule, as Pal writes of her representation by contemporary artists (Pal 1989, p. 40) – 'it is not improbable that originally her portrait was taken from life' – considering her frequent appearances in the public sphere as a figure of authority. Whereas for most other Mughal ladies:

"It is generally believed that Mogul princesses and women of the harem were not seen in public without a veil, and therefore they did not sit for portraits either. However, while they may not have sat for male artists, they would readily have done so for female painters, for which there is some evidence." (Pal 1989, p. 40)



Male artists could then have used these pictures for reference, or even, as Losty and Roy suggests 'family likenesses to their male relatives.' (Losty and Roy 2012, p. 122) The individuality of many of these remarkable women has thus been obscured, as most depictions of princesses are idealised types, based on sketches from other sources or the imagination.

Courtesans, however, would have been more readily available to serve as models, and allow an artist to paint from life. These women were highly sophisticated and refined, trained in the performing arts as well as classical literature, and respected authorities on art and culture whose advice on etiquette was often sought by the sons of noble families. Cat. 8, 'A Prince chances upon a riotous party', depicts a scene of more raucousness and excess, perhaps a reflection of the wilder partying that accompanied the gradual decline of the Mughal Empire in the 18th century. In this characterful and dynamic scene, a prince, who has obviously just been out hawking, is greeted by an acrobatic girl at the top of a pole accompanied by drummers. Elsewhere, bhang (cannabis) is being strained into a vessel, revellers smoke from hookahs, while within the palace couples are embracing and women look over the courtyard from their windows; two share confidences and a hookah in the top left-hand corner.

'Window portrait of a lady' (cat. 4) may also have been modelled on a courtesan, for whom the window portrait format was often used. This image of a beautiful Hindu lady, deep in thought, plays between what is knowable and unknowable, seen and unseen, public and private. She is out of reach behind her windowsill, but also in the public eye; some of her features seem idealised and abstracted like those of the unavailable princesses, but her hennaed hands may hint at her more public-facing profession. The delicate 'Study of a standing girl' (cat. 9), by contrast, seems to be a definite likeness of a real woman. Presumably also a courtesan, she stands and looks right out at us, holding up her *odhani* around her face. Her arresting gaze, captured in the midst of her activity, is unusual and direct, and a welcome remnant from this society where there must be still much to discern about the details of these women's lives, their individualities, triumphs and struggles, and their many routes in relation to power.









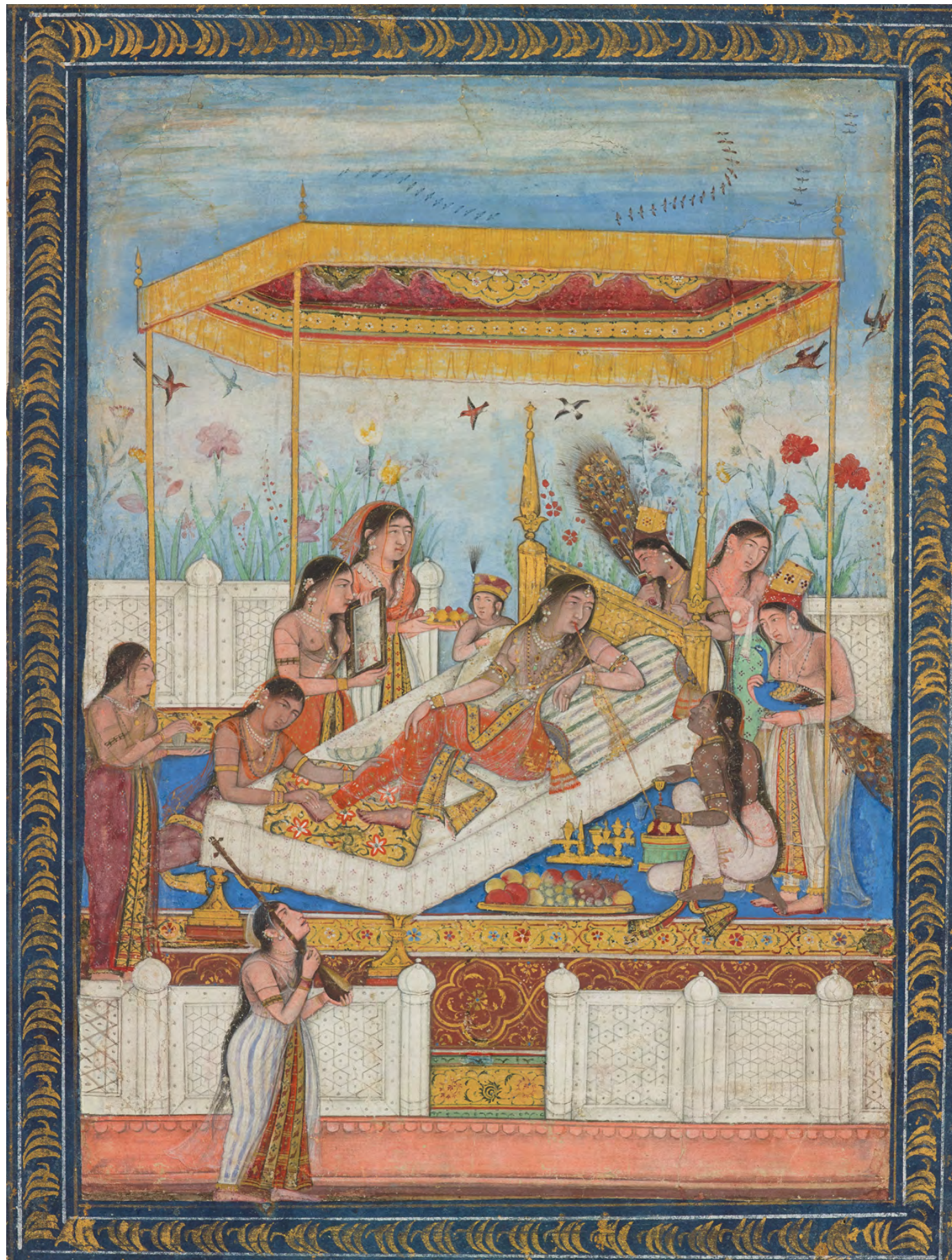
*We thank J.P. Losty for the descriptions, Mary Galloway for the essay, Christine Ramphal for the concept and Danielle Beilby for putting it all together.*

*We hope you enjoy our catalogue. Prices start from £1,600. For full descriptions, please contact us.*

*Francesca Galloway*







1

**A PRINCESS IS ATTENDED BY HER WOMEN**

Imperial Mughal, c. 1620-30

Opaque pigments on paper within a modern blue frame and album mount

Folio 31.2 x 23.2 cm; Painting 20 x 14.1 cm

*Provenance*

Private American collection, (since 1930)

This painting is remarkably refined and detailed in the rendition of textiles and flesh. All the women's faces are exquisitely modelled and expressive in their various ways of sympathy towards the princess. Such refinements suggest one of the Mughal court artists from around the first quarter of the 17th century. A date towards the end of the reign of Jahangir and beginning of that of Shah Jahan is suggested by the details of dress and jewellery.





2

**LADY BATHING ATTENDED BY HER HANDMAIDEN**

Mughal, 18th century

Line drawing on paper laid on larger gold specked paper background with a series of borders in gold, blue, red and black

Album page 33.6 x 26.9 cm; Drawing 15 x 9 cm

Intimate scenes, such as ours, depicting Mughal ladies during their bath were popular during the 18th century at the Mughal court. These pictures allowed the viewer a glimpse of what daily life was like in the zenana.





3

### FOLIO FROM THE 'CHESTER BEATTY' TUTINAMA - KHORSHID REPLIES TO KAYVAN'S DEMAND

Imperial Mughal, c. 1580

Opaque pigments heightened with gold on paper

Folio 25 x 15.5 cm; Painting 17 x 12.5 cm

The Tutanama or 'Tales of the Parrot' is a collection of moralizing fables compiled by Ziya' al-Din Nakshahbi in Persia in the fourteenth century.

The text forms a book of stories told on 52 nights by a talking parrot to his mistress Khojasta in order to keep her amused and engaged and away from an adulterous affair.

Our folio comes from the story illustrating the 32nd night. A merchant named 'Utarid had a beautiful and virtuous wife Khorshid. Having to go on a journey he left her and his household in the care of his brother Kayvan. Instead however of protecting Khorshid, Kayvan sent an emissary to her, telling her he was madly in love with her and entreating her to welcome his advances. Khorshid in the miniature is being solicited by the old woman emissary, but she indignantly refuses and leaves the room. Fearful of his brother discovering his lustful actions, Kayvan accuses Khorshid of adultery – she is taken before a magistrate and immediately condemned to be stoned to death. Khorshid does however survive this and after further terrible misadventures is reunited with her husband. The artist has depicted the development of the story rather like a comic strip. We see Khorshid listening to the emissaries in one corner of the painting and then, in another, she has already left the room.

The architecture depicted gives some idea of the decoration of the women's quarters/zenana in the palace at Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar's principal residence from 1571 to 1585: the small chamber is a simple red sandstone pavilion with white stuccoed walls, hexagonal tiled dadoes, panelled sandstone doors with metal fitments and a carpet on the floor. Outside the chamber the floor is covered in coloured tiles.

The Tutanama was the first work to be illustrated (before the Hamzanama) for Emperor Akbar and is referred to as the 'Cleveland' Tutanama. Our folio is from the second, more refined version of this text, the majority of whose leaves are in the collection of the Chester Beatty Library, and the manuscript has come to be named after it (Leach 1995, pp. 22-74).





4

**WINDOW PORTRAIT OF A LADY (RECTO)**

Mughal, mid-18th century

Opaque watercolour heightened with gold and silver on paper set in an album page of rows of flowers on gold ground

Album page 36 x 22 cm; Painting 15 x 11 cm

**DRAWING OF A HINDU LADY WITH ATTENDANTS (VERSO)**

Mughal, mid-18th century

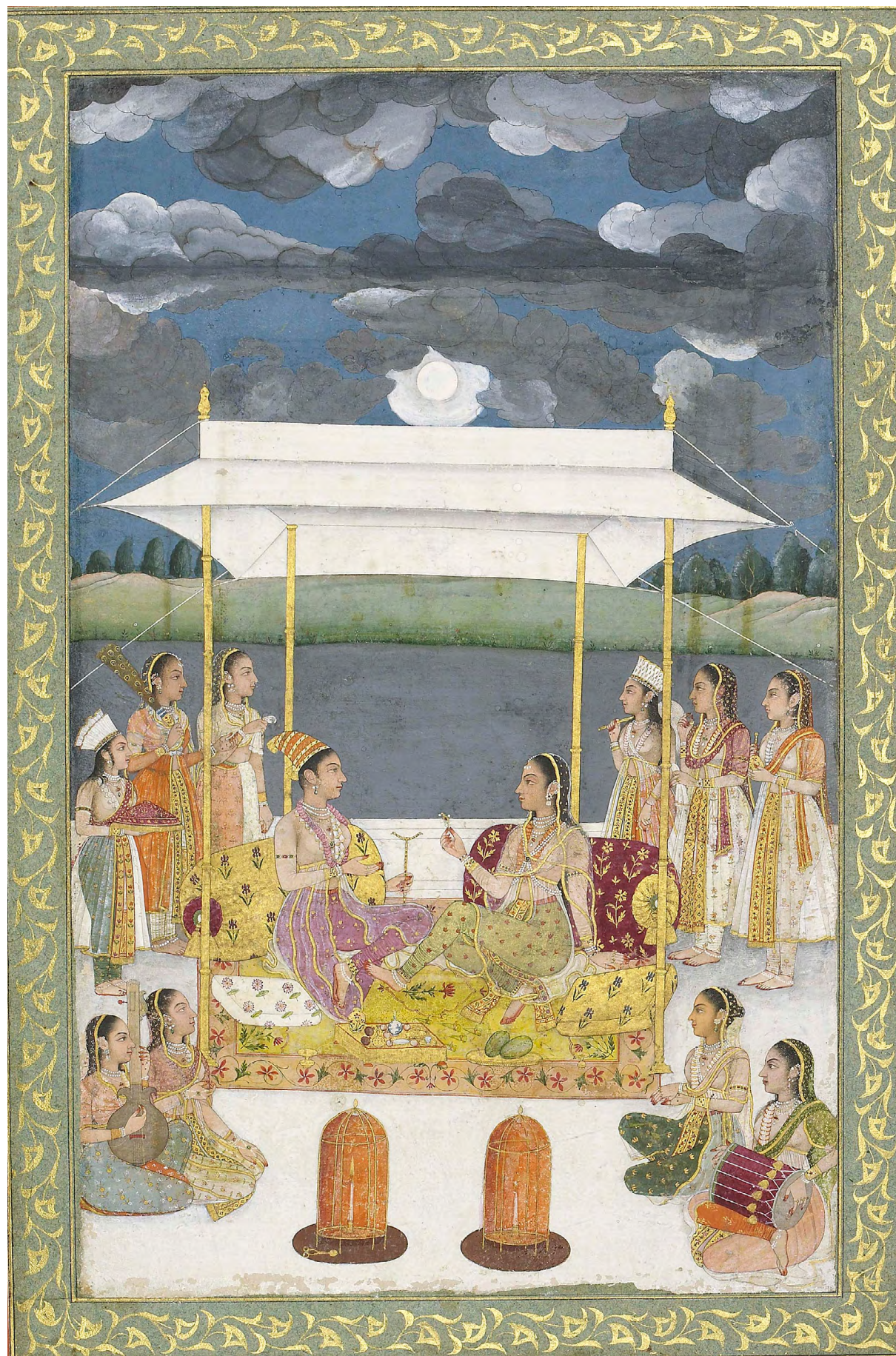
Partially coloured drawing on paper

Apparent 'portraits' of women in earlier Indian painting are either idealized representations of unavailable princesses or else courtesans who are often depicted holding a flask or a wine cup. Whereas no male artist could have had access to the former, the latter were more readily available to serve as models. The window portrait format was often used for such portrayals of courtesans, perhaps through this format suggesting that they are 'public' women as does the henna applied to their hands.

Although few examples are known from the seventeenth century, they were popular in the eighteenth century and were avidly collected by European collectors such as Richard Johnson (see Falk and Archer 1981, no 179) and Antoine Polier.







5

**TWO LADIES ON A TERRACE WITH FEMALE ATTENDANTS AND MUSICIANS**

Mughal, 1730-50

Opaque watercolour and gold on paper

Album page 53.8 x 38.2 cm; Painting 28.2 x 17.6 cm

Inscription on flyleaf and reverse of the painting in Persian:

‘Likeness of the princess who repaired/constructed<sup>1</sup> the Tajganj tomb.’

In the margin, a number: ‘15’

On the verso of the painting are Persian verses in nasta’liq and a signature:

‘I speak well of the great men of religion,  
Whether it be Friday or Saturday,  
The friends (of God) are God’s deputies,  
They are always aware of the truth of matters.

Muhammad Husayn wrote it. It was written in Dar al-Saltana Isfahan, (10?)49.<sup>2</sup>

This beautiful but enigmatic scene, set at night by a lake with a full moon appearing between dramatic clouds, is typical of the fine 18th century Mughal zenana scenes. Our two protagonists are bejewelled and richly dressed Begums, presumably from the Mughal court. They are surrounded by sumptuous carpets, bolster cushions, sweetmeats and fruit and attended to by their musicians and servants. Such scenes are some of the most characteristic of 18th century Mughal painting and even the grandest of imperial albums such as the St Petersburg Muraqqa’ contain similar examples (see Welch 1996, p. 349, pl. 1).

What sets this painting apart from the others is the inscription on the flyleaf and reverse of the painting. Tajganj is of course the name given to the entire complex around the Taj Mahal in Agra, the tomb (rauza) of Mumtaz Mahal, built by Emperor Shah Jahan. The inscription could mean that the Begum or Princess portrayed here may have funded the repair of the Taj Mahal. Like any other Indian building, the Taj Mahal needed constant maintenance and repairs to keep it in good condition.

<sup>1</sup> The word ta’mir can mean both to order the construction of a building or to repair it. In this case of course, the word repair would apply.

<sup>2</sup> This scribe appears to be unrecorded. The number 49 is possibly meant to be the date (10)49 (1639-40 CE), which would be consistent with the hand and style.









6

# **A CHRISTIAN SAINT HOLDING A BOOK**

Imperial Mughal, attributed to Basawan, Mughal, c. 1585-90

Brush and ink heightened with gouache and gold on paper, laid down on stout paper. Blue background and golden halo probably added when the drawing was inserted into an Album in 18th century

Leaf 11.9 x 9.3 cm; Drawing 5.9 x 4.1 cm

Provenance

Stuart Cary Welch collection

Published

In the Image of Man, 1982, no 237

The Mughal artist Basawan, active between c. 1565-1598, was one of the premier painters at the court of Emperor Akbar, on a par with Mir Sayyid 'Ali, 'Abd al-Samad and Daswanth. John Seyller notes that he showed an extraordinary receptiveness to European art, and incorporated many of its visual effects, especially pronounced tonal modelling and atmospheric perspective, into his work (Seyller 2011 p., 119).

This drawing is one of a small group of Basawan's later finished drawings, mainly adapted from European engravings. Basawan imbues his portraits with a depth of perception and a vitality that is often absent from the European original. The face of our saint closely resembles those on five drawings signed by or attributed to Basawan of c. 1590, four in the Musee Guimet, Paris, and one in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (see Okada 1991, figs. 9-11; Okada 1992, figs, 85, 89, 90; Pal 1993, no 54) which are based on the Puritas Regia or similar engraved allegorical figures. Of these, the face in the present figure with her delicate modelled features are almost identical, but in reverse to that of the drawing in the Musee Guimet of a woman holding an ektar and standing on a monster's head (Seyller 2011, fig. 9).



7

# **A SAINT, POSSIBLY SAINT CATHERINE OF ALEXANDRIA, HOLDING A BOOK AND A FLOWER**

Mughal, c. 1650

Opaque watercolour and gold on card

17.78 x 10.16 cm

The Mughal artist who depicted this female saint in the mid-17th century would have certainly had access to European religious prints. Perhaps the European template was of the learned St Catherine of Alexandria. However the Christian source is obscure and our heroine's appearance and posture have been modified in keeping with Mughal conventions.

Mughal versions of European prints and their free adaptations and recreations of their models over the best part of a century from 1580 onwards are evidence of the ways that Mughal and indeed Deccani artists learned to introduce space and volume into their work. Here the saint's easy pose and the sure handling of the difficult three quarter view of both face and body indicate that such concepts had been truly absorbed by the mid-seventeenth century.





8

**A PRINCE CHANCES UPON A RIOTOUS PARTY**

Avadh, Farrukhabad, 1760-70

Opaque pigments and gold on paper

Folio 54.5 x 41 cm; Painting 40.5 x 30 cm

With the decline of the Mughal empire in the 18th century, several court artists moved east, to the rich Muslim kingdoms of Avadh and Bengal. There were several Rohilla principalities in western Avadh in the later 18th century, but Farrukhabad is the only one which had a school of painting. The artist Muhammad Faqirullah Khan, one of the artists who left Delhi around 1760 for the more peaceful climate of Avadh, seems to have influenced the Farrukhabad style (documented in Binney 1973, nos. 103–105; Falk and Archer 1981, nos. 362i–vi; and Leach 1995 nos. 6.364, 365).

Our painting depicts a prince who stumbles upon a riotous party whilst hawking. The scene he is presented with is one of sensuous pleasures, drug consumption and trysts. And just like the prince, we are invited to observe the licentious goings-on in this picture.





9

# STUDY OF A STANDING GIRL – POSSIBLY A COURTESAN

Mughal, c. 1700-1740

Pen, ink and colour wash on paper, laid on down on card

25.5 x 10.8 cm

This fine sketch of a young woman appears to be a drawing made from life, given the immediateness of this drawing.

Since portraying women living in the zenana was not possible, we can presume that our heroine is a courtesan. She does not avert her gaze, but looks straight at us with a certain defiance.

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