

Lesson: Two Mughal Paintings

This lesson is accompanied by a handout,
Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art.

Essential Question: What role does the visual language of Mughal painting play in the expression of royal power and dynastic legitimacy?

Learning Experience: Students will examine two paintings from the Mughal dynasty (1526-1828). One depicts an emperor watching an elephant fight. The second portrays another emperor seated with ten of his ancestors. Students will learn how painters of the Mughal royal workshops used art to express a vision of absolute power.

Anticipatory Set: Do we encounter visual symbols or forms of architecture in our daily lives that not only tell us how to behave, but also that we *must* behave in certain ways?

Context: At its height the Mughal Empire controlled most of the Indian subcontinent. Its founder, Babur (1483-1530), was from [Central Asia](#), born in what is today Uzbekistan. He was a Turk, a member of one of the many Central Asian tribes speaking Turkic languages such as Uzbek, Kazakh, Turkish, etc.

Babur was the great-great-great grandson of Timur (1336-1405, known as “Tamerlane” in the West). The [Timurid dynasty](#) (1370-1405) for a time ruled much of what is today Iran and Central Asia. On his mother’s side Babur claimed descent from Chinggis Khan, the great Mongol conqueror (“Mughal” derives from “Mongol”).

The early Mughal rulers emphasized both their descent from Timur and their Chinggisid lineage through Babur’s mother; they were known equally as the Mughals and the Later Timurids. . . Just as Timur’s descendants claimed that Timur had outdone Chinggis Khan, so Babur and his descendants recorded those aspects of Babur’s career which had surpassed the achievements of Timur (Manz 2002: 9).

Read about Mughal art and culture:

[The Age of the Mughals](#)

[Life and Art in the Mughal Court](#)

[Mughals & the Royal City of Lahore](#)

Victoria and Albert Museum

For Babur high culture meant Iranian (Persian) culture. India was an alien land. Its climate, living conditions, and cultural/religious diversity were all vastly different from his Central Asian homeland.

By the time of Babur's grandson, Akbar (r. 1556-1605), the Mughals had become acclimated to India. Their concept of kingship, for instance, was shaped to fit Indian culture:

While patronizing Islamic institutions. . . Akbar presented himself to his subjects in the radiant glow of an Indian maharaja, appearing in public audience (*darbar*) [seated](#) on a raised platform (*jharokha*) in the manner in which traditional Indian kings or images of Hindu deities were presented for public viewing (*darsan*) (www: Eaton).

Akbar established a ritual whereby every morning he appeared before his people at a special window on the "balcony for viewing." He presented himself as "the illuminator of the universe."

The sight of the emperor at dawn at a window high in the sky had parallels to his Hindu subjects' reverence for the daily reappearance of the supreme celestial source of light and energy (Leach 1998: 110).

Akbar was a great patron of the arts. His workshops included Iranian, Indian Muslim, and Hindu artists. Since the emperor and the imperial family had absolute power over the activities of court artists, Akbar's interest in painting was important for the development of Mughal art:

Akbar's establishment of an atelier of court painters on his accession to the throne in 1556 had a decisive impact on the elaboration and definition of a Mughal style clearly distinct from previous painting traditions proper to Turkey and Iran. Akbar took a keen interest in the work of his court painters, urging them to gradually liberate themselves from Persian models (Okada 1992: 11)

This interest was not purely aesthetic. Depicting the emperor as a heroic, haloed, charismatic figure was one means of proclaiming the dynasty's legitimacy. Another means was through choice of subject matter.

In the 1580s. . . Akbar became interested in history, and alongside the illustration of literary and poetic texts, the emperor had a series of historical texts written and illustrated. These were designed to demonstrate the dynastic and political legitimacy of the Mughals. . . to the vassals of the empire and important court dignitaries (Okada 1992: 17).

Mughal painters depicted events from the emperor's life, military expeditions, festivals, hunts, polo playing, and animal combats. Also, [portraits of emperors](#) or the emperor and his family were common, something rarely seen in Iranian painting. Court artists also depicted [Indian legends](#), [Christian subjects](#), and [Westerners](#).

Court painting was a workshop effort. More than one artist worked on a project—some specialized in borders, some applied gold leaf, some painted vegetal patterns, etc.

The [Hamzanama](#) (Story of Hamza)

Hamza was an uncle of Muhammad. The *Hamzanama* tells of his travels devoted to spreading Islam. Emperor Akbar commissioned a large set of paintings illustrating this widely popular collection of tales.

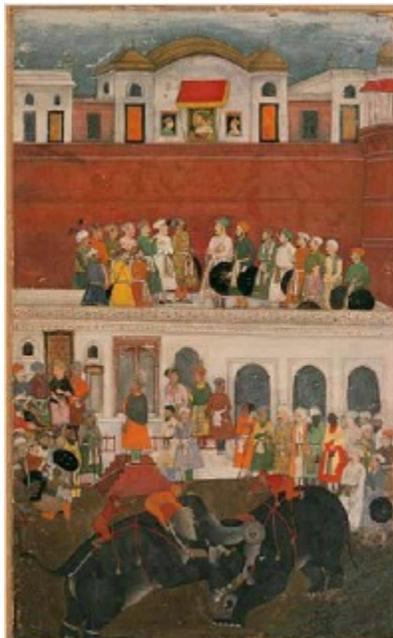
Freer/Sackler Galleries Interactive Website

Rationale: Compared to the past, modern governments have a unique ability to control the everyday lives of their citizens. Empires such as the Mughals were much weaker in this respect. In studying these Mughal paintings students will gain an understanding of pre-modern symbols of power.

Instructional resources: Two Mughal paintings; Table: “The Mughal Dynasty from Timur to Awrangzeb,” along with two brief readings; *Visual Analysis: Four Steps Toward Critically Thinking about Art* handout.

The observations below are meant to be a partial teacher’s guide.

1. *Padshahnama* Scene of Shah Jahan Watching an Elephant Fight India, Mughal (1526-1858) 1640-1645 (KHAL.2006.0022)



(A) [“The Young Rostam Kills the Mad Elephant”](#)

Iran, Safavid
c. 1570

- This work is part of the *Padshahnama*, an illustrated chronicle of the life of Shah Jahan (r. 1627-1658), the fifth Mughal emperor. “*Padshahnama*” means “Chronicle of the King” or “Chronicle of the Supreme Ruler.” The painting is believed to depict an imperial audience that took place in October 1632 (Leach 1998: 111).
- Elephants were [prized possessions](#) and elephant fighting was a favorite activity of the emperor. It is said that Akbar (1556-1605) had five thousand elephants in his stables. Elephant fights were closely linked to imperial audiences (*darshan*) (Leach 1998: 114).
- Compared with (A), the Mughal work is naturalistic. Many of the nobles and officials can be identified from other paintings. The man wearing a white plumed turban at far left on the roof platform, for instance, is the Iranian ambassador. The elderly man in white (sixth from left) is an important official. He appears in the same place in other *darshan* paintings. The two young men on either side of Shah Jahan are probably his eldest sons (Leach 1998: 111, 114).
- The figures stand strictly arranged according to rank with the emperor high above them. The painting forcefully demonstrates

as do all ceremonial scenes produced in the Shah Jahan period, the stratification of power that was so crucial in reinforcing the Mughal’s dynastic authority. . . Even the greatest nobles of the land. . . were literally as well as symbolically kept at a distance from the sovereign, so that they were always forced to regard their communications with him as an act of subordination to an infinitely superior power (Leach 1998: 110).

- In spite of the work’s naturalism, the presentation is essentially flat with some attempt at perspective. The buildings recede in depth. We see the influence of Renaissance European art in their three-dimensional shapes.

2. The Mughal Dynasty from Timur to Awrangzeb
India, Mughal (1526-1858)
1707-12
(KHAL.2006.0023)



- This is an imaginary portrait, a [symbol of dynastic legitimacy](#). When it was painted, only one of the ten subjects, Awrangzeb (r. 1658-1707), was alive. He is the rightmost figure in the painting.
- Although it was painted in the eighteenth century, it depicts the emperor much earlier, around the age of forty.

By that time he had murdered his three brothers and imprisoned his father Shah Jahan, who had been a much-loved ruler. Thus Aurangzebe sat uneasily on the throne, reputedly tormented by guilt. . . In this dynastic portrait, Aurangzebe's father sits opposite him, while his forebears accept him into their ranks, their orderly presence confirming him as lawful potentate (Leach 1998: 148, 149).

Timur (1336-1405)

Timur's son	Timur's grandson
Timur's great-grandson	Timur's great-great grandson / Babur's father
1. Babur (r.1526-1530) First Mughal emperor	2. Humayan (r. 1530-1540,1555-1556)
3. Akbar (r.1556-1605)	4. Jahangir (r. 1605-1627)
5. Shah Jahan (r. 1627-1658)	6. Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707)

- The painting proclaims Awrangzeb's royal heritage as seen in the table above: six Mughal predecessors going back to [Babur](#) (1483-1530, the first emperor) and Babur's male ancestors going back to Timur the Great.
- The Mughal Empire was in decline. Fifty years after Awrangzeb's death India would be ruled by the British East India Company:

The Mughal house had become more memorable for its dazzling textiles, its fur-lined coats, ropes of pearls and jewel-studded armor than for its deeds. (Leach 1998: 148).

- Each figure overlaps the one behind it as if the rows of men are receding back into space. Nevertheless, the overall pictorial impression is one of flatness.
- Notice that we are looking down on the carpet from above at the same time as we see the figures from a lower angle. Had the rug been painted in the same perspective as the figures, how well would you be able to appreciate the intricate carpet design?

- This work is notable for its wealth of detail: the carpet, clothing, the incense burners, the intricate table with its Chinese porcelain and beautifully arranged flowers.

Procedure: Students will discuss these five works using *Visual Analysis: Four Steps toward Critically Thinking about Art*.

- Study the two paintings using the basic elements of design—line, color, value, texture, space, shape, and form.
- Of the seven design elements, do some stand out as more important than others? Can you make a general statement with respect to the design issues that the creators of these works regarded as important?

Andrea Mantegna (1432?-1506) "The Court of Mantua" 1471-74	Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696-1770) "The Investiture of Bishop Harold as Duke of Franconia" 1751
----------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

- Compare this painting with the two European depictions of formal events (above). How do the Mughal and European works differ in depicting the relationship between rulers and nobles and courtiers and servants?
- Study the basic artistic principles—balance, unity, emphasis, contrast, pattern, movement, and rhythm in terms of the two paintings. Do some of these principles stand out as more important than others? Can you make a general statement with respect to the artistic principles that the creators of these works thought important?
- Read “A Society of Spectacle and Refined Luxury” and “Jahangir on His Birthday” from the handout. Compare it to the two Mughal paintings. Can you think of any other societies, past or present, with a similar concern for beautiful luxury objects? How are they similar and different from the Mughals? What does the author mean by “a society of spectacle organized by strict principles of visual order”? What do you think about the way Jahangir dresses on his birthday?

Whole Group Reflection: These paintings had a small audience. They would have been appreciated by the emperor, his family, and courtiers of high rank. They would also have been given as gifts to sub-imperial rulers and other dignitaries. What makes them powerful?

Instructional Modification: An Akbar project. By entering “Akbarname” (“Chronicle of Akbar”) in the “[Search the Collections](#)” function of the Victoria and Albert Museum website, students can gather portfolios of paintings on the life of Mughal emperor Akbar. They can classify and research his different imperial activities.

Application: How does our government express its legitimacy? What objects and everyday symbols show this?

Bibliography

Chopra, P.N. *Life and Letters Under the Mughals*. Ashajanak Publications, 1976.

Eaton, Richard M. 7. "Mughal Culture and Its Diffusion." In *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*. University of California Press, 1993.

<<http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft067n99v9&chunk.id=ch07&toc.depth=1&toc.id=ch07&brand=eschol>>

Leach, Linda York. *Paintings from India*. The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art. Vol. VIII. The Nour Foundation, 1998.

Manz, Beatrice Forbes. "Tamerlane's Career and Its Uses." *Journal of World History* 13.1 (2002): 1–25.

Minissale, Gregory. *Images of Thought—Visuality in Islamic India, 1550-1750*. Cambridge Scholar's Press, 2006.

<<http://www.c-s-p.org/flyers/9781847180735-sample.pdf>>

Okada, Amina. *Indian Miniatures of the Mughal Court*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992.

<http://www.learn.columbia.edu/courses/indianart/pdf/mughal_miniature_okada.pdf>

Acknowledgements

This lesson was created by Eve Eisenstadt, its academic content approved by Kristina Richardson, and the final lesson edited by Martin Amster.