Jnanapravaha

JNANAPRAVAHA MUMBAI
QUARTERLY

OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2023

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Director's Note

There is a festive, promising buzz in the air – the annual Ganesha festival has just ended, the homecoming of the Goddess is keenly awaited, followed soon after by Diwali. The monsoons with their resplendent greenery are about to give way to autumn and its luminous full moons, irresistible to Krishna and his gopis. Winter arrives and, in its wake, international scholar friends to pursue their research and share with us their latest findings and publications. It is a very heady time indeed!

At our end, we too have a quarter full of enquiry coming up. But before we go there, just a small recap of the past one. Our flagship year-long Indian Aesthetics (IA) course has a full house of enthusiastic students who sign in from all corners of the globe every Saturday, sometimes at their unearthly hours, to learn and interact with the inimitable scholars teaching. The virtual world has made this joy possible.

Alongside this, the semester-long course on 'The Indian Temple', with its impressive roster of specialist lecturers, has been edifying participants with incisive and insightful unpacking of monumental structures. The sessions on the 12th/13th-century-CE Hoysala temples of Belur, Halebidu and Somnathpur were specially charged because of their recent nomination to the UNESCO World Heritage List (as will also be the case with Rabindranath Tagore and his aesthetics taught later on in our IA course with the inclusion of Shantiniketan to this list as well).

The upcoming quarter will continue to address the Indian Temple and also the world of museums which continues to be in international news for one reason or the other. Through 14 sessions, 'An Uncomfortable Tour Through the Museum' will zoom into this critical moment of rupture in its long and entangled history by examining contemporary debates, the current crisis and possible futures. Considering a broad understanding of the museum as a site for public encounter with art, culture, politics and history, the series engages with scholars, artists and curators who are at the forefront of these debates.

One of our programme initiatives is 'Curatorial Processes', under which we invite curators of internationally acclaimed exhibitions to make presentations and share the space, layout, artworks, concept, strategies, choices, and challenges with an audience, thus highlighting the specialised nature of a curator and experiencing the rich contextual beauty of the artworks. End October, Dr. Forrest McGill of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco, will take us through his commendable exhibition 'Beyond Bollywood: 2,000 years of Dance in Indian Art'.

The worlds of Yoga and Tantra will once again be revisited through a 4-part lecture series by Prof. David Gordon White on *Sinister Yogis*, his extraordinary publication, which will examine the historical relationship between the terms 'yoga' and 'yogis' as represented in myth, image, and doctrine. We aim to address paradigm-changing books through such discussions as was also evidenced in the recently

concluded lecture series on ‘Shiva’s Waterfront Temples’ by Prof. Subhashini Kaligotla.

Last but not the least, in mid-December, we are honoured to have amongst us a formidable legal and scholastic panel to discuss a book which could not be more timely. *The Colonial Constitution*, authored by Dr. Arghya Sengupta, delves into the origins of the Constitution of India to locate both the genesis of its textual provisions (its letter) as well as the foundation of its ideals (its spirit). It is neither a celebration nor a critique but an honest narration of its colonial foundations, a fact that has been glossed over in recent times.

Much to look forward to even in the new year, which we start with Prof. Finbarr Barry Flood’s in person, 6-part lecture series, ‘Sacrality and Surrogacy in the Devotional Arts of Islam’. As always, we eagerly await your participation, especially as the virtual/hybrid mode has collapsed geographies and brought us so much closer. We hope you enjoy perusing this quarterly which carries all the writeups (and more) mentioned in this note. The last section, Slant/Stance, carries an in-depth essay as a response to one of our seminar series.

My warmest wishes for a Happy Ganapati, Dussehra and Diwali.

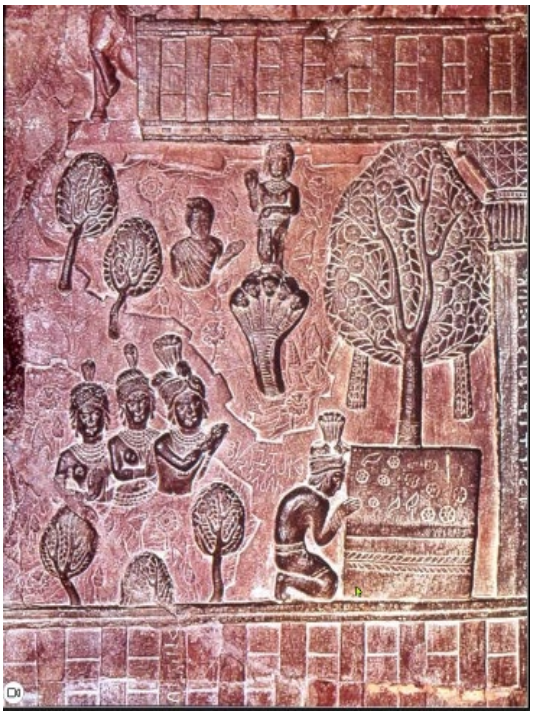
Rashmi Poddar Ph.D.
Director

AESTHETICS

A Folio from the Manuscript of Kalpasutra and Kalakacarya Katha: Jaina Tirthankara Enshrined (upper panel), Celestial Dancers (lower panel). c.1475

JPM's Aesthetics offerings include:
(1) an academic yearlong Postgraduate Diploma/Certificate course in Indian Aesthetics, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (2) a quarterly Postgraduate Certificate course in Yoga & Tantra, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (3) a quarterly Postgraduate Certificate course in Southeast Asian Art and Architecture, as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (4) a fortnight of public seminars and lectures in Islamic Aesthetics; (5) an ongoing series of public seminars in Buddhist Aesthetics; (6) an ongoing series of public seminars in Southasian Painting; and (7) occasional academic conferences and workshops in these fields.

Indian Aesthetics



Last year, we successfully installed and mastered the technology required to have local students present at our space while other students participated in the course online. The Indian Aesthetics (IA) course continues in a hybrid format this year, with students from all over India and spread across the world from Australia to the USA, with one in Dubai. Our aesthetically pleasing space, located in a heritage building in Mumbai's Fort area, is equipped not only with excellent technical equipment but also boasts a reading room full of rare books on Indian art, architecture and aesthetics, philosophy, contemporary art and other subjects related to our offerings of knowledge. With a record sixty-five students enrolled in the IA course this year, we continue to encourage the interaction of online students by ensuring that they can pose queries verbally to each resource scholar. IA sessions retain their collegial, comfortable, lively and personal atmosphere in this way. This year, thirty-five students are participating in the rigorous IA Diploma where

each receives individual attention. The IA class is, as usual, a cohort of accomplished individuals of varied ages from many fields: the diversity makes for an especially enriching experience for both students and teachers.

The continuously evolving IA course will close this year with a pair of brand-new sessions: two contemporary Indian artists of note will share their creative processes with our students. The sessions in the course continue to follow an approximately chronological map to ease the student's way. The course begins by using the aesthetic rubric of *Rasa* as a link to knit together the sessions in its first half. This aesthetic view of history, archaeology, architecture, anthropology, literature, philosophy, and theology is the frame on which the IA course is stretched. It is an introduction to the aesthetics of the Indian subcontinent, spanning 5,000 years.

As always, the Indian Aesthetics course 2023-24 began in mid-July. Jnanapravaha's director, Dr. Rashmi Poddar, conducted her signature sessions which explore classical Indian aesthetics, form, content and meaning as well as *Rasa*. Dr. Poddar's copiously illustrated sessions introduce students to the sculpture and painting of the subcontinent through the eyes as well as the mind. Drawing upon Bharata's *Natyashastra*, an early dramaturgical text, for her understanding of *Rasa*, she showed how this lens can be applied to Indian visual art. She also drew in other seminal classical Indian texts such as the *Vedas* and *Puranas*, along with philosophical ideas which have been well-accepted in the subcontinent over the centuries, and combined them with recent scholarship to illuminate Indian art. Her sessions were augmented by Sanskritist and Yoga aficionado Dr. Veena Londhe's lectures on Sanskrit poetics which discussed in a synoptic manner the philosophical journey that culminated in Abhinavagupta's *Rasasutra*.

The module on early Indian Aesthetics includes a masterly survey of Harappan culture by Dr. Kurush Dalal in which he discussed archaeological and scholarly positions on this period, including present-day findings and theories. The scholar argued that extant material remains show economic links between many cities in the Northwest of the subcontinent, affirming the wide spread of this culture. This was followed by Professor Naman Ahuja's exposition of Sunga terracotta, along with ivory and other artefacts, beginning before the first millennium. His research shows that 'mass production' was made possible in this period through the creative use of moulds, as is apparent in the manufacture of innumerable terracotta objects found in a wide arc that traverses the northern part of the subcontinent. Dr. Shailendra Bhandare's lecture dwelt on the numismatics of the Satavahanas, which not only facilitate an understanding of the political history of the period but also display a connection with other forms of artistic production. These sessions prove that coins and objects made of terracotta are mistakenly viewed as forming a 'lesser' tradition of art and hold an equally important place in illuminating the past as does 'high' art.

Dr. Supriya Rai, a scholar and practitioner of Buddhism, offered an insider's knowledge of the field. She illustrated the life of the Buddha and his teachings through stone images from the notable sites associated with the faith: Sanchi, Amaravati, Bharhut, Nagapattinam, Kanaganahalli and many others. Dr. Rai's adherence to and belief in Buddhist teachings allow her to explore Buddhist philosophy and its multifarious meanings, as defined by various Buddhist schools, in the manner of an adept rather than a researcher. She used *Jataka* narratives to explore Buddhist philosophical concepts, shedding light on the concepts of Buddha, *Dhamma* and *Sangha*, the four Noble Truths and the doctrine of dependent origination. Her extensively illustrated sessions also familiarised students with aniconic and iconic representations of the Buddha and dealt with ideas regarding sovereignty and compassion in *Mahayana* Buddhism. Swati Chemburkar's session on *Vajrayana* Buddhism dealt not only with the artistic and philosophical underpinnings

of this branch of the practice but also its political reverberations, apparent right up to the present day.

Dr. Jaya Kanoria's session on the basics of academic writing aims to equip IA diploma students with necessary skills but is always opened to all students in the course. The lively second part of the session focussed on reading academic literature related to aesthetics, and mandated student input. Since the last seven years, students have been provided curated readings related to each lecture, in addition to the synopses, bibliographies and glossaries that were shared earlier. The readings are a substantial, rich and authentic source of knowledge that deepens the experience of IA students. They are made available on our online learning management portal, JPM Think, and have had a salutary effect on the writing produced by IA diploma students. Several essays first written in fulfilment of the IA Diploma have been published by external sources, bringing prestige to this effort and rewards to our hard-working students. Our unassuming goal is to train independent and thoughtful writers capable of producing publishable material; this goal is being realised without any fuss by the carefully and challengingly structured IA Diploma.

At the end of September, students have traversed not only these areas of Indian aesthetics but have also dipped into the waters of Jainism with Dr. Viraj Shah's first session on Jain philosophy and art. Dwelling on the beginnings of Jainism and the *tirthankaras*, Dr. Shah showed how the ascetic *Jinas*, born into *kshatriya* families, are considered heroic figures because of their victory over worldly desires. The title given to Vardhamana, the historical *Jina* who is thought to have lived around the time of the Buddha but preceded him slightly, is *Mahavira*: the brave warrior. We look forward to Dr. Shah's next session in which she will discuss the reasons for the inclusion of popular deities from other faiths into the Jain pantheon and share her primary research on the Jain caves of the Western Deccan. **– *J.K.***

Buddhist Aesthetics

PAST PROGRAMMES

The Kolhapur Bronzes: A Glimpse into The Artistic Taste Of The Satavahana Period

September 01st, 2023, 6:30 PM IST | Prof. Pia Brancaccio (Professor in the Department of Art and Art History at Drexel University)

Kolhapur Bronzes: Intermateriality and Imitation

On September 1st, 2023, I had the opportunity to hear Dr. Pia Brancaccio speak about her reading of select items from a buried hoard of bronze items that were excavated during the archaeological explorations of the Brahmapuri mound in Kolhapur, Maharashtra, in 1945. Through intertextual reading of images and aesthetic expression in early Buddhist art in the Deccan region, and Hellenistic art in the ateliers of Italy during the early centuries of the first millennium CE, she situated the objects within the wider artistic tastes of the urban elite during the Satavahana period.

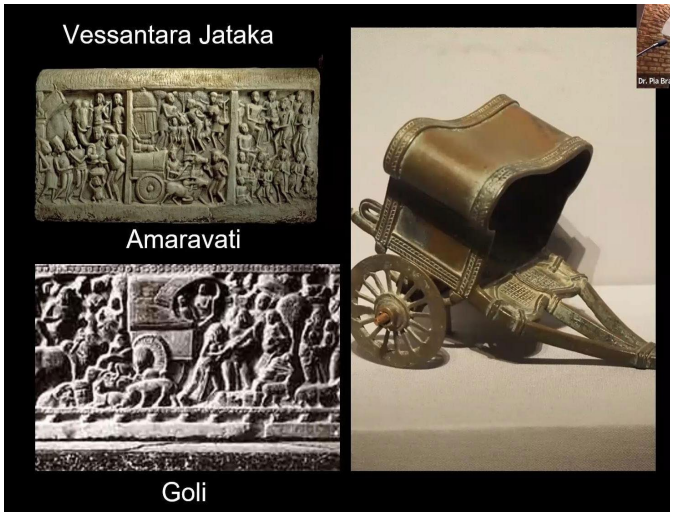
Three bronze pots, excavated from the ruins of a Satavahana urban house, did not see daylight for 15 years, until the archeologist in possession of these items revealed them to K. Khandalavala. These pots had reportedly been intentionally buried during the Satavahana period, as they were found at a depth of 3 metres in the south-east corner of the house. Among these objects, those that were of Roman origin were studied through the chronological development of style and artistic taste to reveal that these objects were treasured for some time before they were buried underground, but not necessarily all at once.

We find mention of a place called 'Hippokura' in Ptolemy's *Geography* (7.1.6 and 83), the seat of the Kura kingdom. The Kura kingdom, a chiefdom turned kingdom – was a precursor to the spread of the Satavahana kingdom in the Western Deccan. The decline of the Kuras overlaps the rise of Satavahana influence in the region. Brahmapuri, near Kolhapur in Maharashtra, is speculated to be the urban centre of Hippokura. This not only explains the presence of the Kura coins (bow and arrow insignia) along with coins from the Satavahana period in the hoard, but also allows us to situate the bronze hoard within an urban context.

Indian Objects

Imitation and Intermateriality

Situating the miniature bronze toy cart within the elite urban aesthetic paradigm of the Satavahana period, Dr. Brancaccio, presented intertextual evidence of the covered bullock cart's ubiquitous presence as a symbol and object of locomotion in the theologico-political imagination of the Satavahana elite. She presented the early Buddhist murals representing the *Vessantara Jataka*, where Vessantara, a wealthy gentleman, is depicted at two places (in Andhra Pradesh, and the Goli temple in Amravati, Maharashtra) to be leaving his life of urban prosperity on a similar, hooded bullock cart.



Miniature bronze cart from the Brahmapuri mound (left) juxtaposed against murals from Amravati and Andhra Pradesh (right)

Alternatively, a body of commemorative stones, also known as 'hero stones', in the Government Museum Kalaburgi, Karnataka, provide ample evidence of the use and symbolic associations of the cart. One of these stones in particular carries an inscription in Brahmi, stating that the couple in the cart are a merchant and his wife.

Gulbarga 'hero stones' depicting the bullock cart

Dr. Brancaccio emphasised the intermateriality of various iterations of these images in coroplast and metal. The terracotta imitations of metallic, decorative images represent an imitation of the elite aesthetic sensibility in objects that can be availed by the non-elite. Drawing the continuity of this practice into the 5th century CE, Dr. Brancaccio presented the treatment of the trope of the clay cart in the Sanskrit drama titled, 'The Little Clay Cart', '*Mricchakatika*', where the protagonist wants to play with a golden cart, *sonakatika*, instead of the titular cart, enunciating the 'hierarchy of materiality in children's toys'.

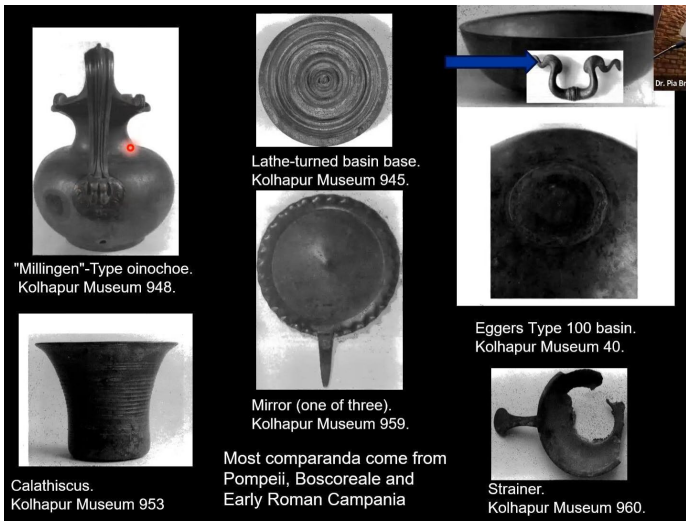
Other objects of Indian origin found within the hoard narrate a similar story. The miniature bronze 'Elephant with Riders', particularly resembling the terracotta 'Horse with Rider' excavated at Ter, Maharashtra – another Satavahana urban centre – points towards the intermaterial imitation of these objects. Both these objects mirror the stylistic treatment of the limbs and postures of the ubiquitous elephant-with-riders motif in early Buddhist murals of Karle, Bhaje, and Amravati in Maharashtra. However, the image in the bronze hoard, found buried underneath an urban household, points towards both ornamental and cultic use of the object.

Objects such as the miniature bronze *khandika*, (also called sprinkler) and plaques, though represented in Buddhist art as auspicious and ornamental objects, may have similarly lent both ornamental and cultic value to these bronze objects that were alternatively manifest in their terracotta representations across the geographical region of the Western Deccan.

Roman Objects

Reception and Replication

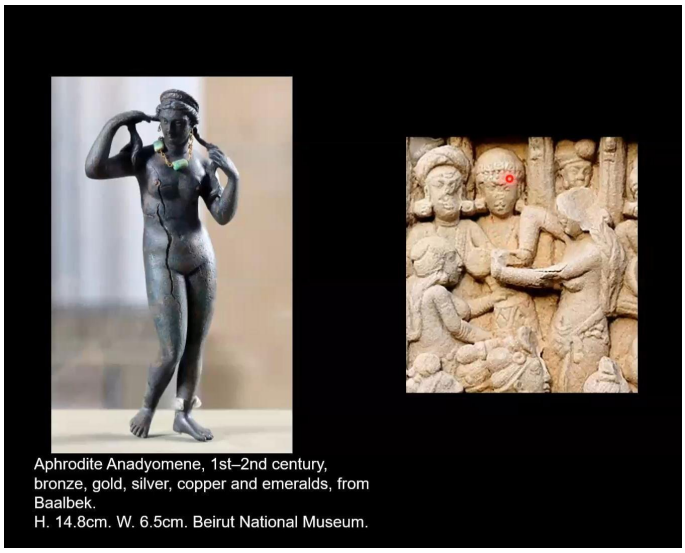
The objects of Roman origin represent a picture of opulence within the Satavahana urban elite. The found objects, including a *millingen*-type oinochoe, a strainer, jugs and ornate handles, and a calathiscus, depict a culture of grandeur around the consumption of wine. These everyday objects along with 3 mirrors, pots and basins were sourced from the finest ateliers of Capua in Campania, Italy (De Puma 1191).



Everyday bronze objects of Roman origin, found in the Brahmapuri mound, Kolhapur

Products of the early Indo-Roman trade, these objects availed by the elite were replicated in terracotta for the masses. Images travelled across the Red Sea to the western ports of India in the form of finished objects, moulds, and plaster casts. The jam required for constructing moulds of fine images in the ateliers of Italy was supplied from the Western Ghats, which in turn led to the proliferation of certain images at a somewhat global scale. The bronze *emblema* depicting Perseus and Andromeda is an example of one such image. The figurative trope was popular across the Western world (Pompeii). The *emblema* is purported to have originally adorned the bottom of a vessel. Both terracotta and metallic vessels

of the sort are found across the Western world in the first century CE.



'Ivory Carvers', mural at Sanchi (right) juxtaposed against Aphrodite Anadyomene (left)

The reception of images was pivotal to their proliferation. The glorious bronze sculpture of Poseidon found in the hoard was a popular image in the Roman and Germanic culture of the 1st-2nd centuries CE. The image traces its origin to the lost masterpiece of the Hellenistic sculptor Lyssipos. Dr. Brancaccio also presented evidence in the murals of Sanchi and Bharhut to critique the artistic environment during the life of these images. In the 'Ivory Carvers' mural at Sanchi, she notes that not only does the treatment of figures and movement resemble that of the Aphrodite Anadyomene from the 1st-2nd centuries CE, but even particular details of the headgear testify to the naturalisation of an Indo-Roman aesthetic paradigm in the early centuries of the first millennium CE. The ivory carvers who carved the mural and whose merchandise was recently recovered in Pompeii were, in fact, influenced by Roman aesthetic sensibilities.

Conclusion

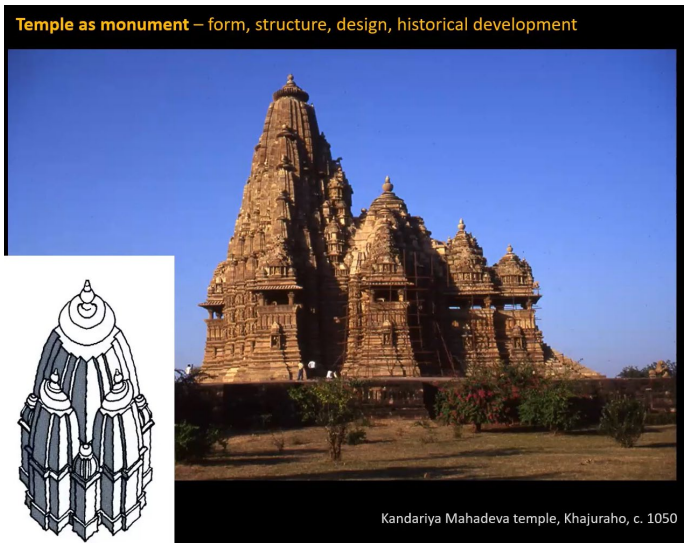
The bronze objects recovered from the Brahmapuri mound at Kolhapur reveal an intercultural image of the elite urban culture of the Satavahana period. The processes of imitation, representation, and mimesis – through the Red Sea trade route for Indo-Roman trade, present a unique confluence of Indo-Roman aesthetics of the 1st century CE. They invite us to peer longer at other objects found across the Roman world to investigate their origins, and politics of image production. **– *R.J.***

The Indian Temple

PAST PROGRAMMES

Approaching the Temple in South Asia

August 10th, 2023, 6:30 PM IST | Prof. Crispin Branfoot (Reader in the History of South Asian Art & Archaeology at SOAS, University of London)



Dr. Crispin Branfoot, in his inaugural lecture for the course on The Indian Temple, spoke of how to approach the temple in South Asia. He discussed the various methods and approaches we can take to think about the temple. He began with the question, "What is a temple?". The Greek and Latin roots of the word refer to an enclosure and a space sacred to a specific deity. He considered first, temples in general, and then, specifically, temples of South Asia. Both, in essence, are enclosed spaces, separating a sacred space from a more public, secular space.

There are different ways in which one can approach a temple. Dr. Branfoot spoke mainly of five approaches, or starting points, to understanding the temple – the temple as a monument, as a ritual, as a symbol, as politics, and as space.

When we approach the temple as a monument, we consider the structure itself – its size, how it was built, the materials used in the building, and so on. As an example, he looked at the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple of Khajuraho and its *nagara* style of architecture. The scale of the temple is striking, and the platform defines the temple space. One has to climb up steps to approach the temple, and the scale of the temple draws our eyes upwards. One can look at the design of the structure, from the outside to the inside, the placement of sculptures and the choice of sculptures. He emphasised the importance of knowing the terminology of architecture to understand temples; in this case, the Sanskrit words used to describe the different parts of the structure. The monument can be understood as a single structure, but also as part of a group, such as monuments from a particular period have certain common features which can be used to understand them better. Furthermore, he said that later temples in India can be looked at from the point of view of continuity. It is also important to understand the regional and temporal stylistic forms of temples, such as the Bishnupur terracotta temples, and how they came about. To understand the temple as a monument, it is also important to have a historical understanding of Indian religions, and the transition of forms of worship from the Vedic religion to temple Hinduism, as well as the transition from mobile temporary structures to temples in stone.

To approach the temple as a symbol is to understand its meaning. This is the approach of Stella Kramrisch and others, and was a popular approach from the 1940s to the 1980s, where they considered the temple from the point of view of measure, proportion and orientation. This is also looking at the temple as a *vastu purusha mandala* – not as a two-dimensional plan, but a three-dimensional structure. The temple can be considered as a microcosm as well as a macrocosm – not just as a residence of God, but the body of God. An interesting question here

is whether this is how it was considered in the period it was built: were people aware of these symbols and meanings of temples, or were these elite concepts meant only for certain visitors?

Another approach to a temple is through the rituals – what goes on inside the temple. It is also important to focus not only on the main shrine, but all the shrines in a temple, as whole, how the architecture controls the movement inside the temple, how people move about inside. More importantly, as the abode of a deity, as a *devalaya*, it is not only the devotees who move about inside, but also the deity himself. It is important to understand these movements to truly understand the temple and what it symbolises. Even among deities, certain people enter certain portions, thus bringing about a sort of social gradation.

To approach a temple from the point of view of politics is to situate the temple in the larger historical context. Current studies of temple, politics and kingship deal with this approach. It is important to understand why certain temples are built at certain periods, and why some temples are maintained while others fall out of use. He took up the example of the Brihadeeshwara Temple in Thanjavur as the paradigmatic example of a royal temple, as well as the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple and the Lakshmana Temple of Khajuraho. Building a temple is a politically demonstrative act. Hence, it also becomes a symbol of a dynasty, and sometimes is also destroyed as a symbol of victory over the dynasty,

The final approach Dr. Branfoot considered was that of space: in the historical, as well as the geographical sense of the word – understanding the temple in its landscape setting. The temple is usually presented as a solitary structure, but it is built alongside other structures, in a particular landscape, which alters the way we look at it. For example, at Khajuraho, the Kandariya Mahadeva Temple has to be looked at in the larger landscape of the other temples, to Vishnu, Surya as well as the Jain temples. Furthermore, relations between the temple and the palace, the temple and the marketplace, as well as the residences of different classes of people can be considered. They can also be looked at in the context of the larger geographical features, such as Hampi. Temples have to be considered as living spaces of use, with changing landscapes.

Temples are also part of pilgrimages, or *tirtha yatra*, and the *mahatmyas* and *sthala-puranas* speak of these *tirthas* or sacred spaces. Certain groups of temples and spaces have survived, while others have fallen out of use.

Dr. Branfoot concluded his talk with two more aspects of temples – replicas in other countries, as well as replicas taken home in the form of architectural models and paintings. They situate the temple within the home, or within easy reach of the devotee, thus transplanting the sacred site to a different landscape.

Dr. Crispin Branfoot speaks during 'Approaching the Temple in South Asia'

Thus, there are multi-disciplinary approaches to understanding a temple, and everyone can contribute in some way or the other to the ongoing studies. **– *A.S.***

Mountain/Cave/Palace/Temple: Buddhist Rock-cut Architecture in Western Deccan

August 16th, 2023, 6:30 PM IST | Prof. Pia Brancaccio (Professor in the Department of Art and Art History at Drexel University, Philadelphia, USA)

Dr. Pia Brancaccio speaks during 'Mountain/Cave/Palace/Temple: Buddhist Rock-cut Architecture in Western Deccan'

With her beautiful lecture on Buddhist rock-cut architecture in the Western Deccan, Dr. Pia Brancaccio transported us to the era of earliest Buddhist cave temples and enlightened us on how those basalt rocks have been breathing life since the last two millennia. Starting with Buddhist worship practices, she eased us into the concept of stupas as a manifestation of the body of the Buddha, the teacher. She presented light technical details for the viewer on *pradakshina patha*, *vedika*, *harmika* and *chhatras*.

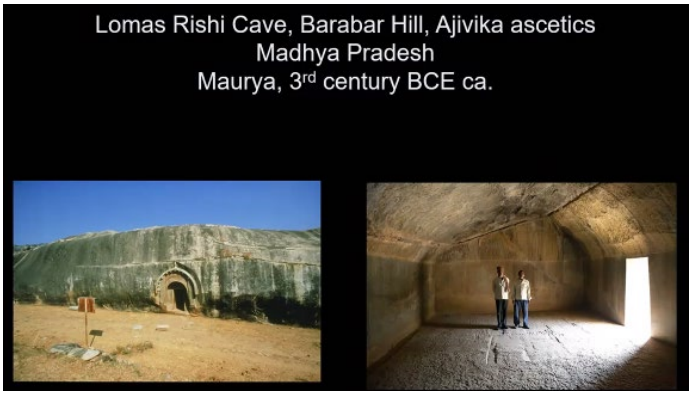
As she took us closer to the architectural marvel of the Bharhut stupa, she posed and pondered upon the question of having relics inside the *anda*, the stupa dome, and further ahead in the lecture, she expanded on the funerary association of stupas with the *arhats*, the advanced Buddhist monks. At a later stage, she elucidated how the selection of the temple site was made.

Once the listener was oriented, we strolled inside the *chaityas* and *viharas*. Pia asked us to look closely at the relief architecture of Bhaja's *chaitya* hall in cave 12 as she drew parallels with the elements that exist in the worship spaces, such as the balconies, the pillars, the multistoried buildings and the *chaitya* arches. Looking at the *chaitya ghar*, she suggested that the caves that we see now as open caves were actually protected environments with wooden facades, and the idea was to filter out the external world for the ascetic. With such manifestation of metaphysical asceticism, she explained how these sentient architectural spaces imitate the natural spaces around them and were conceived as a bridge between asceticism and the urban environment. She broke down the daily routine of a Buddhist monk living in the *viharas* next to the *chaityas*, and presented an interesting insight about the beauty and intricacy of these spaces as a key element for their economic functioning and their sustainment.

Coming to the Western Deccan region, we broke away from the notion of looking at these 800 Buddhist cave sites in isolation. The temples and monasteries were actually clustered in the three main regions of present-day Maharashtra – the coastal area, the ghats and the upper plateau. While she referenced back to the colonial scholars and talked about her observations from the documentation of these caves, we got interesting insights such as how the earlier Buddhist caves were more wooden than the later ones. Now the question arises – why caves? Looking at the episode of Indrashailaguha in 2nd-or-3rd-century-CE Gandhara art, where Buddha is illustrated meditating inside a cave-like structure, we unravelled the sonic aspect of caves that is critical for meditative amplification of the recitation, and hence the caves were seen as a space of regeneration. In the digital space of her lecture, Pia was able to recreate the experience of a meditating monk in order for us to understand how the cave sites were integral to the landscape around. Looking at the view from the cave, we were able to synthesise the chirping of birds and the call of a peacock to his beloved, and the overwhelming awe of monumentality of the multistoried caves in the natural environment.

Looking back at the palatial architecture of the Bhaja caves, one noticed the presence and importance of wooden beams made of teak. Looking at the contrast between the architectural ornamentation of *chaityas* and *viharas*, the listener was able to grasp the philosophy behind conceptualising different spaces. Pia walked us through the beautiful *Mahajanaka Jataka* in

the interiors of cave no. 1 of Ajanta and talked about the palatial architectural elements of the cave and the elements illustrated in the painting, such as the pillars, which are actually not the load-bearing structures, and the checkerboard motifs on the wall. The second half of the lecture focussed largely on how these living caves were not just prayer halls and living quarters but were actually manifested as 'divine palaces'. Supporting this delightful insight with the Satavahana royal inscription from the *vihara* of cave no. 3 at Nasik and cave no. 16 at Ajanta, she expounded on how the relics of Buddha were kept and worshiped in the palaces of *devatas*, how the Mithuna couples at the facades probably meant to evoke the *devatas*, and how Indra became the link between these living rocks and the divinity within and around. Pia's beautiful lecture came to a celebratory conclusion with the 'Carpenter's Hut' dedicated to Vishwakarma at Ellora, which is still regarded as a sacred site for artisans. **– *P.S.***



Patronage and Process: Creating the Caves at Ellora

August 23rd, 2023, 6:30 PM IST | Prof. Lisa N. Owen (Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Art History at the University of North Texas, USA)

In her lecture entitled 'Patronage and process – creating the caves at Ellora', Dr. Lisa Owen looked at revisiting the site and thinking of the caves in new ways. She looked at the dynamics of the site: not just the Jain caves, but as a whole, and the fluidity of artistic and devotional practices that made Ellora thrive as a multi-religious pilgrimage site. She proposed that Ellora didn't develop in separate religious phases, but instead, from the 7th century, as a space for Shaiva, Buddhist and Jain experiences.

Early scholarship focussed on the Shaiva caves dating to the 6th and 7th centuries; stylistic considerations link them to the Kalachuri period; then, following the historical and stylistic patterns, the Buddhist caves were dated to the 7th and 8th centuries. The mid-8th to 10th centuries showed renewed Hindu activity during the Rashtrakuta period, especially the Kailasa cave. The Jain caves are seen as the last phase of development at Ellora, linked to the Rashtrakuta kings of the 9th and 10th centuries.

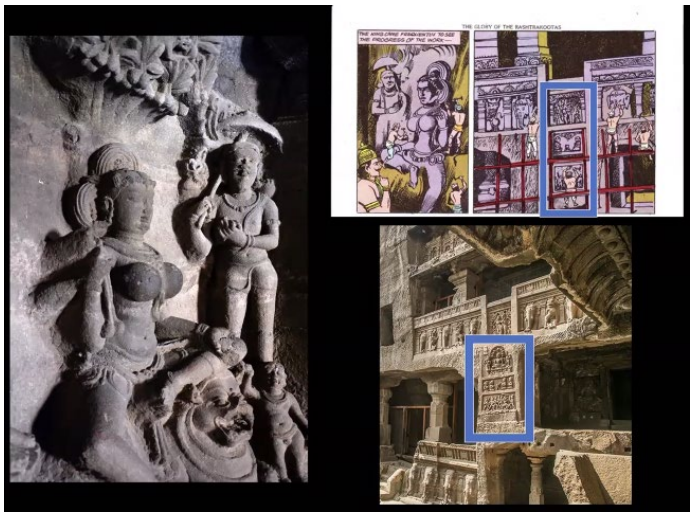
Dr. Owen has challenged the traditional notions of sponsorship and patronage in her works by first talking of the kinds of records that we have. She spoke of the Ellora plates, attributed to Dantidurga, which record him visiting the site. They record the gift of a village near Ellora and mark a direct connection of the site with the Rashtrakutas. The only imperial inscription of Dantidurga in cave 15 on the Nandi pavilion is an unfinished one which highlights the genealogy of the Rashtrakutas, victories of the kings, and donations of land. She pointed out that it's more of a political and genealogical account, not directly linked to the temple building at the site, but it definitely connects the site to the Rashtrakutas.

The Baroda plates mention Krishnaraja I and a great Shiva temple at Elapura, issued 40 years after his reign (early 9th century). This definitely associates the Kailasa temple with him.

The only 8th / 9th century inscription within the Kailasa cave complex is the one associated with the Gajalakshmi, which mentions the patron as Bhadrankura of the Radhe family. This inscription refers to other kinds of patronage, not just of the king, but an important or influential family.

She then went on to discuss how the carvings can give us information about how the caves were created. She showed an image of a Jina from a pillar in the Jain caves, which depicts

a Jina seated in meditation with small figures flanking him. One of the smaller figures is of a monk, identified by the whisk-broom he holds in his joined hands. Such human figures, Dr. Owen suggested, could offer information regarding other donors at the site. She went on to show more such figures found all over the site. Monks can be seen with elongated earlobes, kneeling at the feet of a Jina, holding whisk-brooms. There are also other figures seen kneeling at the feet of Jinas, suggesting donations towards sculptures by Jain monks, teachers as well as laypersons.



Dr. Owen took us through a number of such images from the Jain caves showing donors. One image is inscribed and identifies the kneeling figure as a donor named Nagavarma. He is a layperson ornamented with necklaces and bracelets. He wears garments, has a moustache, beard and long hair pulled back. His hands are joined in homage. On the other side of the Jina is a female figure, presumably his wife.

Similar couples are seen in the paintings on the cave walls. They can be seen as portraits of donors, of worshippers, of human agents in the creation of the caves.

There is also a figure seen with a dagger flanking the images of Ambika and Parshvanatha. They are not associated with the larger narratives of the deities, and hence must be donors or patrons.

Another such figure is that of Sohila, mentioned in an inscription as a *brahmacharin* with an image of Santhinatha. This figure is very different from that of the monk or the figure with the dagger. This is a *brahmacharin*: not a layperson, but presumably someone taking up advanced study to potentially become a monk. On the other side of the Jina's feet is the counterpart of such *brahmacharin* figures – a female attendant goddess. She holds a palm-leaf manuscript, indicating study.

Another figure identified as a *brahmacharin* holds a begging basket. There are a surprisingly large number of such images, and they appear to show *brahmacharins* at different levels of becoming a monk.

Similar depictions of laymen and monks are also seen in the Buddhist and Shaiva caves, though in limited numbers. However, it does show that by the 9th / 10th century, there was a rising interest in the caves and commissioning of sculptures by laypersons.

The second part of her lecture was about the process: the physical practicality of creating these monuments and the artisans working back and forth between them, i.e. the internal working of the site.

Unfinished sculptures give an idea of how sculptures were created, how the stone was blocked out and then carved. It indicated movement of work. This movement is also seen in the actual choices made in the carvings of the caves, in the top-down approach which allowed the rock to be used as scaffolding as the caves unfolded.

Dr. Owen drew attention to 3 Jinas at the top of cave 33, which she believes are some of the oldest Jina figures at the site. She bases this on the style of the throne they are seated on, which has a centrally draped cloth similar to that seen in the older caves from the 7th / 8th century.

Furthermore, the carvers would have used the rock as scaffolding to carve on the upper storeys simultaneously. Hence, the pillars of the upper storey of the Jain cave would be from the same period. Comparing the veranda pillars from the Jain caves to the pillars from the other caves, they seem to conform to the early style of pillars. She dates these carvings to the late 7th / early 8th century, pushing back the current dates by almost a century.

Comparing the Kailasa cave to the Jain cave that is called *chhota* Kailash, the layout, both inside

and outside is the same: both caves are created in very similar ways, there is a common approach and a common perception in functioning of space between the two temples. There is also a sacred vocabulary shared between these two temples, e.g. *ganas* with flower garlands as well as flying figures are seen in similar positions in both temples.

Dr. Lisa N. Owen speaks during ' Patronage and Process: Creating the Caves at Ellora'

The Kailasa cave has topographical references to Kailash, the abode of Lord Shiva, in the form of the images of Ravana lifting Kailash as well as Shiva catching Ganga in his locks of hair. In the *chhota* Kailash cave, there is no such immediate topographical reference, especially since the permanent location of the Jinas cannot be pinpointed. However, there are a few later carvings, set in niches, dancing figures of Indra modelled after paintings inside the Indra Sabha caves. These are Indra dancing at the consecration of the Jina's assembly hall. Thus, the cave depicts the celestial assembly hall created for the first sermon of the Jina. The main shrine inside has the painting of a dancing Indra just above the shrine, and on both sides, those gathered to listen to the sermon. Thus, there is a transformation of the temple from just a cave temple to a celestial assembly hall.

Thus, the process shows that the caves were probably not created in distinct religious stages, but in a far more fluid manner, indicating that we had a multi-religious site much earlier than the 9th century. **– *A.S.***

The Kailasanatha Temple in Kanchipuram: Meaning in Material Form

August 31st, 2023, 6:30 PM IST | Prof. Padma Kaimal (Michael J. Batza Chair in Art History at Colgate University)

Detailed Reportage will be carried in the next JPM Quarterly (Jan - Mar '24)

CRITICISM & THEORY

Apnavi Makanji | Untitled - Significant Other | 2018 | Courtesy: Vadehra Art Gallery

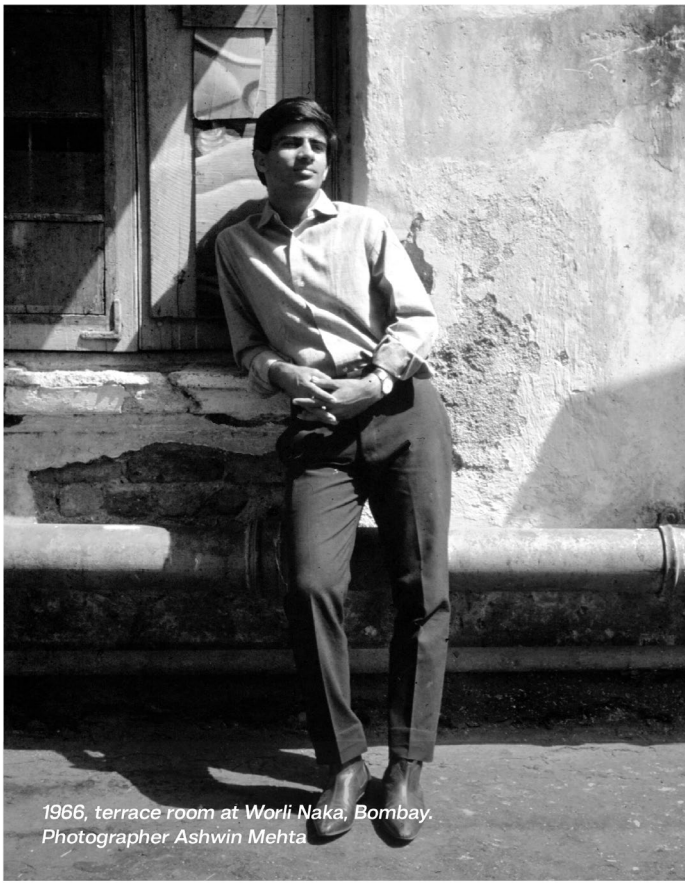
JPM's Criticism & Theory offerings include: (1) a Certificate course in Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory as well as ongoing public seminars and lectures in the field; (2) an ongoing series of public seminars and lectures in Indian Intellectual Traditions; and (3) occasional academic conferences and workshops in these fields.

Community Engagement

PAST PROGRAMMES

Celebrating Vivan Sundaram

July 26th, 2023, 6:30 - 8:30 PM IST | Lead Speaker - Shireen Gandhy, Sudhir Patwardhan, Shaina Anand, Abhay Sardesai, Natasha Ginwala, Nancy Adajania, & Chaitanya Sambrani.



1966, terrace room at Worli Naka, Bombay. Photographer Ashwin Mehta

In a heartfelt tribute to the late artist and visionary Vivan Sundaram, friends, colleagues and admirers gathered at Jnanapravaha in a memorial event organised by Chemould Prescott Road to celebrate his life and work. The evening was a moving occasion filled with remembrance and speeches that cast light on the profound impact Vivan had on the art world, and the many bonds and friendships that grew from it.

The evening began with a screening of filmmaker Avijit Mukul Kishore's film *Vivan*, which set the tone. The film, especially made for Sundaram's Delhi memorial, was a fitting tribute to the artist, having been put together with raw footage from Mukul's own film as well as interviews and snapshots from other films featuring Vivan.

Following the screening, the event transitioned into a series of memorial speeches delivered by some of Sundaram's closest friends and artistic collaborators.

Shireen Gandhy, Director of Chemould Prescott Road and also Sundaram's gallerist, began by relating that this year, 2023, was Sundaram's 80th. She spoke of how he had spent a long time creating an assembly of events for this monumental year, never for a moment believing he would not be there to witness it. The year began with Sharjah Biennial 15 for which he made a new body of work titled *Six Stations of a Life Pursued*. This was followed by his first ever installation piece, *Memorial*, opening in The Tanks at the Tate Modern. Also planned this year was the launch of a book on Kasauli Art Centre (for which Sundaram worked on until his last day at home) as well as the renovation of Ivy Lodge that housed the Centre. The year progressed as if the artist was ever present.

Sudhir Patwardhan, a friend of Sundaram, spoke of their close bond and shared personal anecdotes that shed light on Sundaram's thoughtful and kind consideration of others, particularly highlighted through his work at the Kasauli Art Centre over the years. He spoke of the human side of Sundaram - the man who loved children and the care behind the building of the Centre, a place that came to become history, making sites for thought and art-making.

Shaina Anand, an artist, filmmaker and co-initiator of CAMP, discussed her introduction to and interactions with Sundaram, and their shared passion for archives, activism, research and art, often unpacked over a glass of whisky.

Abhay Sardesai, editor of ARTIndia magazine,

highlighted Vivan Sundaram's role as a leading figure of thought and expression when looking at India's political landscape. He delved into the enduring importance of Sundaram's art in capturing and archiving the evolving political climate, affirming its lasting relevance and significance.

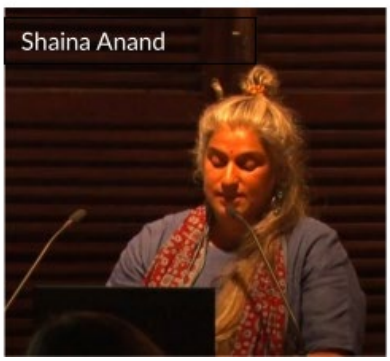
Curator Natasha Ginwala spoke of Vivan and Geeta's reaffirming presence in her life and how Sundaram's artworks have forged the kind of curatorial and political language that continues to influence and shape the practices of professionals like herself in the field.

Chaitanya Sambrani, an art historian and curator, paid tribute to Sundaram's ability to bring people together by way of his excavations into the raptures and sutures of modernity that were explored through the acts of gathering, and processes of assembly and assemblage throughout his oeuvre.

Nancy Adajania, a curator and art critic, spoke of being fortunate to have witnessed Sundaram's cutting-edge experiments in conceptualism over the years, and how he recognised fierce independent thinking.

Following this, a letter written by screenwriter Saeed Mirza, who shared over 45 years of friendship with Sundaram, was read out, recalling their memories and journey together, summing up the collective sentiments of the evening.

The memorial event honouring Vivan Sundaram was a testament to the tremendous impact he has had not just on the world of contemporary art but also on the people who encountered him and spent time with him. Through film, speeches, and personal anecdotes, attendees celebrated the life and work of an artist who has left an indelible mark on the world of art. As the evening came to a close, it was evident that Vivan Sundaram's legacy would continue to inspire his friends, and generations of creatives and art enthusiasts to come. **– *A.P.***



Announcements

AN UNCOMFORTABLE TOUR THROUGH THE MUSEUM

October 26th – December 15th, 2023 | Mainly Tuesdays & Thursdays | Lecture: 6:30 – 8:30 pm IST

FEE: Rs. 15,000 | Online Platform: Zoom | Register: www.jp-india.org

The museum is under attack. And deservedly so. This year, Aesthetics, Criticism & Theory zooms into the museum at a critical moment of rupture in its long and entangled history. Over a fourteen-session series, we take a meaningfully uncomfortable tour through its conceptual halls as we examine contemporary debates on its history, its current crisis, and its possible futures. Considering a broad understanding of the museum as a site for a public encounter with art, culture, politics and history, the series engages with scholars, artists, and curators at the forefront of these debates. Whilst analysing traditional understandings of museums, the series also situates the exhibition, the biennale, the art fair, online spaces and collective forms of creative organising as critical sites of inquiry, in an effort to lead us back to a museum's original, ancient purpose – to be a site for debate and reckoning, while reaching towards possibilities that have thus far been disregarded.

Palace of Versailles Museum | Photo: Adira Thekkuveettil

FACULTY SCHOLARS:

Keynote Address: Arjun Appadurai

Aaron Cezar
Anthony Gardner
Dan Hicks
David Joselit
Diwas Raja KC
Farid Rakun
Kajri Jain
Karen Archey
Nizan Shaked
Sabih Ahmed
Sunil Shah
Tapati Guha-Thakurta
Zoe Butt

Jnanapravaha

CURATORIAL PROCESSES

CURATING THE EXHIBITION: "BEYOND BOLLYWOOD: 2000 YEARS OF DANCE IN ART"

FORREST MCGILL

October 27th, 2023 | Lecture: 7:30 - 9:30 pm IST | Free Online Zoom Public Lecture | Register: www.jp-india.org

Circle Dances with Krishna (detail), approx. 1700-1725, India; Madhya Pradesh state. San Diego Museum of Art, Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, 1990.969

Dance is everywhere in the arts of the wide Indian cultural world, from the sacred dance of a deity bringing the world into being to the sensual dance of a courtly performer before a maharaja to the glamour of modern Bollywood. A recent exhibition at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco employed video, custom lighting and sound effects, and special environments to combine immersive experiences with the display of 120 superb traditional artworks. A challenge was to bring scholarship to the general public in accessible and attractive ways.

Forrest McGill, Wattis Senior Curator of South and Southeast Asian Art, has worked at the Asian Art Museum for more than twenty-five years. Previously he was a museum administrator and a teacher, curator, researcher, and writer in Asian art. In 2016 he organized the exhibition *The Rama Epic: Hero, Heroine, Ally, Foe* and edited the catalog. For the last several years he has been co-organizing with the Cincinnati Art Museum the major exhibition *Beyond Bollywood: 2000 Years of Dance in the Arts of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Himalayan Region*. He wrote an essay for and edited the 272-page associated publication.

Jnanapravaha

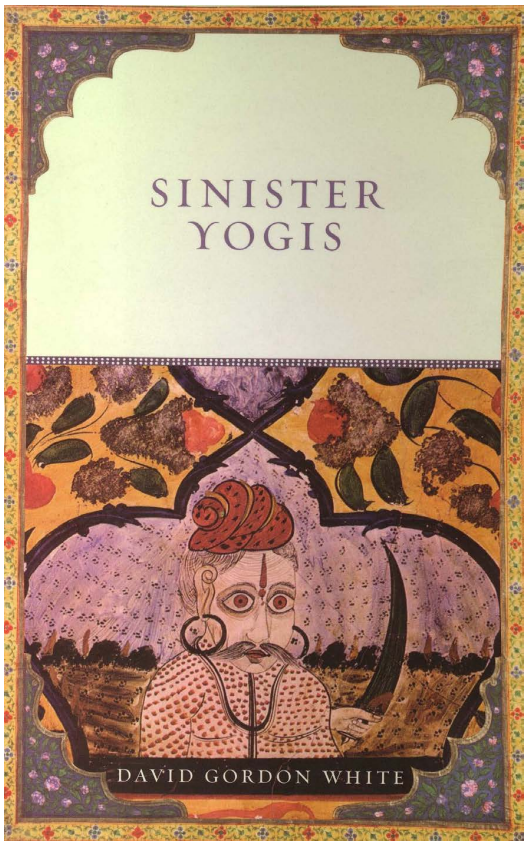
YOGA AND TANTRA

SINISTER YOGIS

DAVID GORDON WHITE

December 4th & 6th, 2023 | Lecture: 6:30 - 8:45 pm IST | Online | Platform: ZOOM

Registration Fee: Rs. 2000 | Register: www.jp-india.org



Historically, the Sanskrit terms "yoga" and "yogi" have very little in common. Whereas the former has one of the widest semantic fields of any word in the Sanskrit lexicon--ranging from "warfare" to "magical art," to the more familiar denotations of meditation and postures associated with *pātañjala* and *haṭha yoga*--the latter has most often been employed to denote a powerful, but also dangerous and ultimately sinister figure more often associated with the dark arts than with quietest ascetic practice. In our meetings, we will examine the historical relationship between these two terms as represented in myth, image, and doctrine.

Session 1: Yoga and Warfare in Ancient India
Session 2: The Bodies of the Yogi
Session 3: Tantric Yogis and Tantric Yoga
Session 4: Mughal, Modern, and Colonial Accounts of Yogis

David Gordon White is Distinguished Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara and Associate Research Fellow at the Centre d'Études Sud-Asiatiques et Himalayennes in Paris. He is the author of six books, including *The Alchemical Body: Siddha Traditions in Medieval India* (1996); *Kiss of the Yogini: "Tantric Sex" in its South Asian Contexts* (2003); *Sinister Yogis* (2009); and *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali: A Biography* (2014). He is also the editor of *Tantra in Practice* (2000) and *Yoga in Practice* (2010). He was the recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim fellowship in 2007, and three Fulbright Fellowships for research in South Asia.

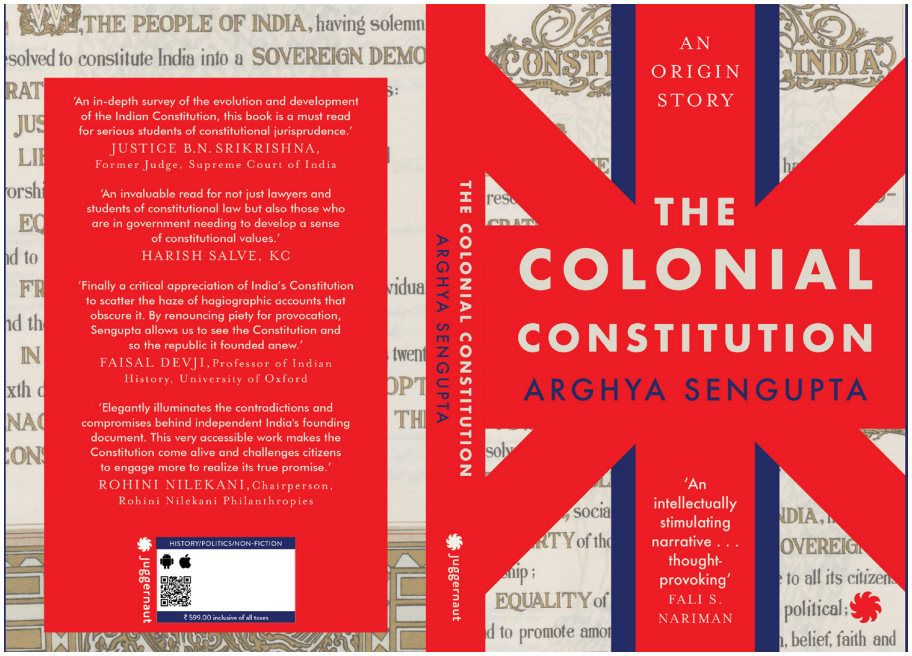
Jnanapravaha

BOOK DISCUSSION

THE COLONIAL CONSTITUTION

ARGHYA SENGUPTA (AUTHOR & PANELIST)
JUSTICE GAUTAM PATEL & PROF. FAISAL DEVJI (PANELISTS)
RAJDEEP SARDESAI (MODERATOR)

Free In-Person Public Lecture | December 16th, 2023 | Tea: 6:00 PM | Discussion: 6:30 - 8:30 pm IST



The Colonial Constitution, published by Juggernaut Books, is a story of the origins of the Constitution of India. It is neither a celebration of the constitution, nor a critique. Instead, it is an honest narration of the colonial foundations of the Constitution, a fact that has been glossed over in most scholarship on the subject. It features Ambedkar, Savarkar and Gandhi in leading roles ably supported by Rajendra Prasad, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel and Shyama Prasad Mookherjee.

ARGHYA SENGUPTA
Research Director
Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

JUSTICE GAUTAM PATEL
High Court Judge
Bombay High Court

FAISAL DEVJI
Professor of Indian History & Director of the Asian Studies Centre at the University of Oxford

RAJDEEP SARDESAI
Anchor, Reporter, Journalist and Author

Jnanapravaha

ISLAMIC AESTHETICS

SACRALITY AND SURROGACY IN THE DEVOTIONAL ARTS OF ISLAM

FINBARR BARRY FLOOD

January 8th, 9th & 10th, 2024 | Tea: 5:45 pm | Lecture: 6:15 - 8:45 pm IST | Registration Fee: Rs. 3000

In-person with live streaming on ZOOM | Register: www.jp-india.org

Sankoré Mosque and madrasa, Timbuktu, 1582 CE, © Elizabeth Whiting & Associates / Alamy Stock Photo

Friday Mosque of Mandu, 1454 CE, © Finbarr Barry Flood

In the era of Artificial Intelligence, 3D printing, and Virtual Reality, questions about copies, replicas and surrogates are once again current. Yet, from the mimesis of sacred architecture to the copying of texts, through the embodied repetition of rituals, or the serial production of pilgrimage souvenirs, replication, reproduction and surrogacy have long been integral to many practices of devotion. Centuries before the modern era of technological reproduction, these made use of techniques of mass production such as engraving, molding and stamping. Despite being produced in multiples, many such devotional materials also had an intimate relationship to the human body. This series explores the resulting tensions between multiplicity and singularity, originality and surrogacy in the devotional arts of Islam.

Finbarr Barry Flood is director of *Silsila*: Center for Material Histories, and William R. Kenan, Jr, Professor of the Humanities at the Institute of Fine Arts and Department of Art History, New York University. His work engages the potential of material culture to nuance histories of transcultural or transregional connectivity in ways that challenge their instrumentalization in essentialist politics of the present. Recent publications include *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton University Press, 2009), awarded the 2011 Ananda K. Coomaraswamy Prize of the Association for Asian Studies, *Technologies de dévotion dans les arts de l'Islam: pèlerins, reliques, copies* (Musée du Louvre/Hazan, 2019) and *Tales Things Tell – Material Histories of Early Globalisms*, co-written with Beate Fricke.

Slant/Stance

Surface, Depth, Bewilderment: Propositions for Thinking about the Feminine in the Paintings of Mughal India

January 9th, 10th & 11th, 2023, 6:15 - 8:30 PM IST | Prof. Molly Emma Aitken (Associate Professor at The Graduate Center and The City College of New York (CUNY))

Written by : Sarvesh Harivallabhdas

"The object of art is not simple truth but complex beauty."
— Oscar Wilde

Introduction: Towards an Ideal of the 'Feminine'

"Hindustani poets, north and south, liked to imagine paintings to be like women and women to be like paintings." The painting, as an object in relief, in all its fragile aliveness, becomes a female beloved for its maker and beholder.

In Harshadeva's early 7th-century-CE Sanskrit play *Ratnavali*, the image of a beautiful woman painted by the king, the source of passion, heartache, and amusement that drives the narrative towards a union of lovers through a wedding, cannot, because of the emotional fabric woven by the text, but be a painting of his beloved.

A Mughal painting of a beautiful Rajput woman gazing at herself in the mirror constitutes her as an idol unlike any to be found in Iran and China; femininity was considered divine in Sanskritic aesthetic traditions and the Mughals embraced them to cement their presence in the Hindustani landscape as culturally Indic.

The imperial *darshan* of the Mughal emperor instantiated him as *padshah*, the divine incarnate to whom the world was betrothed, and the beholder of his presence became his disciplined female devotee, apprehending the cosmos and himself in it as the king's bride. Male hierarchical relationships at the time were coloured by a rhetoric of erotic-devotional passion.

The 18th-century-CE wall-paintings at Nagaur Palace of women – *sahelis* – gazing amorously at each other, are not a representation of 'lesbian-love'; they envisage and evince truths about passionate solidarity that only their feminine forms enable.

An 18th-century-CE Lucknow painting presents a delicate, flat-chested yogini playing Krishna's flute – a masculine instrument – while an 'animal *darbar*' and *gopi*-like women surround her, enthralled. Yoginis typically inhabited liminal spaces in terms of gender and orthodox religious practice, and granted benediction to other women and kings by virtue of their spiritual acumen.

The complex network of relations evinced above centralises the feminine as a dense cultural trope. The feminine here may be theorised as an *aesthetic object* that evokes the love, wonder, and tenderness of its beholder. It is an *aesthetic presence* in painting that frames access to emotional truths about love, beauty, imperial order and belonging, and divinity for the cultural producer and recipient of a painted work. Femininity is an *ontological state* of an imperial subject which properly adulates the emperor as a divine person and image; it consummates an allegiance to hierarchy. The feminine ideal also encompasses women who exercise devotional authority by virtue of their non-normative social existence and who sometimes embrace masculine attributes.

The range of references above braids cultural resonances across time and place. Specifically, however, these conceptions of the feminine and femininity concretised a powerful and poignant dialectic between aesthetic and social praxis in the Mughal and Rajput worlds, and the kingdoms of the Deccan between the 16th and 18th centuries CE. The feminine and femininity is, above all, an achievement of the imagination; as object, image, and ontic state, it is a poetic creation and a poetic agency of being.

Thus, Prof. Molly Aitken's three-day lecture series created an alchemical "field of play" in which (a) complex discursive explications of the imaginative faculty, coalescing with a poetics of the feminine in painting and life underscored the socio-philosophical dimensions of the artistic process, and dovetailed with (b) delineation of 'cosmopolitan flows' of visual and literary practices across the geo-political terrain mentioned above. Furthermore, (c) the grounding of ideals and practices of femininity and masculinity in an imperial milieu, and (d) a demonstration of how aspects of such ideals/practices were confounded at times by an aesthetics of non-normative social contexts, all breathed life into an artistic moment that is about femininity as paint as 'realness' and 'illusion', as the realness of men and women, and as not about women at all.

This poignant negotiation of femininity as a malleable quality that inheres in the surface and depth of aesthetic production, both of which yield bewilderment, illuminated how modes of being human were conceived of by a significant historical moment.

The Mirror, and the Face in It: Aspects of Art as Life

The feminine is, above all, an achievement of the imagination – as object and image, it is a poetic creation. Its realness as art has real consequences for the texture of social life.

The arduous physical labour of image-making that solidifies artistic imagination and makes it rich in consequence illuminates how femininity inheres in the very art object itself. A competent connoisseur was intimately familiar with the exacting, delicate process and was adept at discerning the quality of materials employed for it, aside from possessing a repertoire for relishing the finished work's technical excellence.

The duration of the physical process: the selection of slender sheets of paper that are carefully burnished to hold paint, the sourcing and making of precious pigments, the initial drawing in lampblack, the thin priming in white over that drawing, the re-articulation of the drawing after that, the application of paint in thin layers, the burnishing of the paper after each coat of paint with a stone rubbed on its back while it lies face down on ivory or glass, and finally, the impasto ornamentation of the painted image, establishes a relationship of tenderness on the part of the artist towards the emerging object. It is assigned to his care as a beloved woman would be (Fig. 1.1).

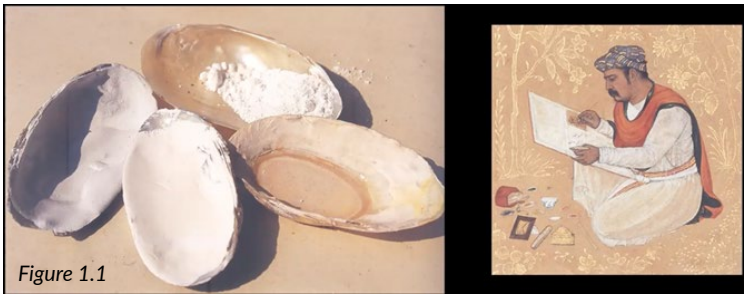


Figure 1.1

A poetics developed around the acts of drawing and painting that take this equation further. Sometimes, compositional models were transferred onto fresh paper through the use of *charbas*, "animal parchment pricked with holes to trace drawings"[1]. The act of 'stabbing' something so fragile felt like delicate violence. Thus, a Persian poet writes that his Indian beloved pricked the *charba* of his heart with her gaze. Hindustani poets imagined painters as confounding skin with pigment, hanging gold on 'ears' of paint, and letting "translucent washes drift across bellies of colour to be confused with veils that might be lifted". This is how a female beloved came to be.

"The fact that paper and pigments [and hence the completed object] are so fragile and precious is of the essence in the poetics of painting." Paint flaked off from the object even in its own day. However, strong character resides in a painting's highly resolved technical excellence and beauty, and its "soulful expression"; connoisseurs were drawn to this. This delicacy, layered with intimations of strength, evoked equivalences with the ideal feminine form. "The ability to recognise and foster beauty [by owning and relishing paintings] was a test of character, and the arts trained the elites to take care of what was vulnerable and worth cherishing. A strong ruler [and nobleman] was, by default, a sensitive connoisseur [of painting]", like Krishna was of his *gopis*. "To treat a painting and a young woman well were not separate in the aesthetic norms of courtly life."

Painting is imbued with a stillness that can be 'heard'. Surface yields bewilderment; a question quickens in the connoisseur's mind: 'how can something that never moves have such hold on the imagination, such realness, such life?'

In pre-modern Indic models of mind and aesthetic theory, north and south, the processes and products of the imagination claim an ontic status that is more enduring and effective than the world of everyday perceptions and objects because they are more highly resolved and sharply wrought, as the external and internal process of making underscore. Their 'realness' – or in several cases, the tension they evince between 'real' and 'unreal' factors, context-specifically defined and related – is defined on the basis of how they actualise and idealise

realities rather than represent them.

The connection of the Sanskritic precepts introduced here briefly to Mughal and Rajput painting is tenuous or concentrated at best depending on period and location, and is discussed in the next section. However, they demonstrate *one* mode of 'receiving' painted feminine forms as real and paintings as living feminine objects. The Mughals also held allegiance to Islamic and other cultural legacies. *Khayal* is one Urdu word for imagination but it is not introduced here.

A painted composition is manifested by a generative faculty, *bhavana*, that 'brings something into being'. A painting, like language, begins first in the mind and *acts* upon the objects it encapsulates, bringing into being a liminal, independent space between internally and externally constructed realities. For logicians, *bhavana* works through the coalescence of memory that brings into being an occluded idea or an object, replete in its 'original' colours and textures, with a form of attentiveness to it that generates a new reality from that memory.

To create a 'view' of the "'soft sandal mountain winds' caressing 'vines of love'"[2] for a *Gita Govinda* series of 1730, the painter Manaku drew upon his memory of a poetic legend in which "snakes are [attracted] to the fragrance of sandal and remain coiled around the trunks of sandalwood trees"[2]. He would never have seen, physically, these trees that grew in the distant south. However, the resplendent rendition of incredibly hued crystal rocks piled on top of one another, on which trees bear snakes of various colours and skin patterns around their trunks, stimulates the beholder's own faculties of memory, attention, and recognition – his *bhavana* – and affectively moves him. The sandalwood trees thus 'brought into being' actualise a new reality that indelibly impacts upon our knowing of such trees already existing in nature.

In certain strands of aesthetic theory, *pratibha* helps to explain what a painted composition 'illuminates'; it is an "intuitive understanding"[3] that creates artworks of unprecedented "beauty and clarity"[3]. The term clarity is operative; for early theoreticians, *pratibha* helps "the [artist] see things as they truly are – *yathartha*"[4] – or in popular parlance, a true artist knows the nature of certain things without having to see them directly.

This understanding is of import in conceptualising – like the emperor Jahangir did – painted compositions as crystallisations of divine truths; and, of ideal properties cohering in pre-existing realities that elude everyday perception. This has real consequences for seeing everyday worlds.

An inscription on an illustrated *Rasamanjari* album from Nurpur states that the manuscript "containing many pictures which are the wealth of the mind, was created to see the creation of God and to realise the hollowness of the world". The poet Zuhuri at the Deccan court of Ibrahim Adil Shah II conceives of a painter putting in motion a breeze "which throws aside the veil from the face of the beautiful". *Pratibha* is also the "receptive inspiration"[5] in the beholder or *bhavaka* that brings the artist's intention and effort into being.

Thus, *bhavana* and *pratibha* are theorised – in aesthetic discourse from 10th-century-CE Kashmir through the 17th century CE at Mughal courts – as enabling artists and beholders to co-create 'forms more real than living man'. Unconcerned with mimesis, they allow one avenue of insight into how the feminine is brought into being as aesthetic reality, an ideal configuration that resonates in beholders' minds (Fig 1.2).

Figure 1.2

The experience of *rasa* in the literary and dramatic arts entails a universalised living through by a beholder of the pertinent emotion or *bhava* evoked by an artwork. The historian of aesthetic theory David Shulman emphasises, "*Rasa* in Sanskrit poetics is not an emotion. It is rather the idea of an emotion, depersonalised through the process of conventional observations…Aesthetic moments are 'real'…only insofar as they are…brought into being in a highly patterned…way."[6] Thus, 'singularity' or innovative artistic imagination that contributes to each artwork's uniqueness and realness has to function within artistic convention.

Keeping the precepts of stylisation and generalisation in mind, the potency of paintings can be explored through conventions of courtly poetry in the Hindi-speaking and Persian worlds of and before the period under study. Prof. Aitken notes that painting was a compelling motif in such literature. Here, a rich, layered phenomenon emerges where such poetry which embodies "an aesthetics of distance and ideation, rather than immediacy and feeling"[6] engenders *rasa* precisely by rendering paintings as immediate, personal, as arousing feelings of shattering intensity, and playing on the tension between painting's revelatory and illusory nature. It is in this conception that an aesthetics of the painted beloved is situated.

Thus, Prof. Aitken elaborated, "The greatest spell is the one placed on a lover. Paintings were never more alive for Mughal afficionados than when they made a beloved present." Paintings discover our beloved, what is beloved to us, before we do. The *bhavana* of artist and beholder mutually resonates such that the artist finds

the imagistic language that properly crystallises the *ishq* anticipated in a beholder; the beholder's focussed attention brings the image into existence by finding his love for it. *Ishq* is maddening; thus, the 13th-century-CE Shirazi lyric poet Sadi, widely read by Persian literati at the Mughal court, writes, "If you cherish your sanity, do not behold beautiful visages with your gaze. And if you do, bid farewell to your restful sleep." This spell could also be broken by paintings, and several Southasian authors describe paintings as a means to meet lovers. As a literary conceit, seen in *Ratnavali*, it testifies to the real consequences of imaginative acts. The living subject, when we meet him or her, is a confirmation of what the painting has found in us.

The 16th-century-CE Mughal poet and statesman Abd al Rahim Khan-i-Khanan admonishes the painted image "for [withholding] half of her face, thereby slicing his heart in half. The verse is a play on the Mughal convention of painting women in profile". And yet, in the throes of passion, we may forget that paintings, their impact so bewildering, withhold the living subject from us. "Radha, in a verse of Keshavdas's *Rasikapriya* (1591) fears that the painting she holds in her hand of Krishna will bite her lips and untie her skirt. Her *sakhis* remind her that she can't be in Krishna's presence unless she puts the painting down. Paintings do not embrace back. (And yet, somehow, they do)." Thus, such poetic convention frames its own tensile combination between 'real' and 'unreal' in painting.

The Mughals [and the Rajputs] recognised painting's potency to inhere in its being more and less than words, than the reality we perceive with our physical senses. Poets praised women as painted portraits because paintings are more [ideal] than life. The *chitrini nayika* is one who is beautiful like a painting. "The comparison does not lie flat, however, because [painting's perfection is tainted]. [What] pricks the heart is the stillness of the painted figure. A verse in the oft-painted 15th-century-CE *Rasamanjari* says, "No sound from the bracelet on her arm. No flutter in the blouse of her breast. The pupils of her eyes are unmoving…You couldn't tell a slender girl from the painting of a woman were it not for the goosebumps rising on her arm at the mention of your name." The *nayaka's* name breaks the stupor that has made a lifeless image of her. Thus, painting is 'lifelessness' because it is without [*ruh*] and yet its mode of withholding "makes it conversely alive in its hold on us".

The beholder's mind quickens with a question that inverts the one posed earlier: 'how can such an exquisite world never move?'. The painting as feminine object and the feminine as painted beloved are in a unique position to stimulate such a question in one with a poetic consciousness that emblematises, stylistically, bad connoisseurship.

Shifting to the presence of poetry in painting, a folio from a 17th-century-CE *Chandayana* manuscript at the Rylands Library, Manchester, testifies to how artistic configuration brings poetic tropes into being in fresh ways. The composition depicts a yogi, who had fainted upon witnessing the heroine Chanda's beauty, describing it to the king in song. Dr. Jaya Kanoria writes, "Chanda is unaware of the celestial light of her own beauty"[7]. This folio 'portrays' a black sky – "filled with music and yearning"[7] – between the yogi and the heroine. The *nakhshikh* (head-to-toe) description in Hindi poetry eulogises Chanda as "a perfect, aniconic beauty akin to the black sky"[7]. Blackness becomes a metaphor for 'blindness' induced by perfection and fainting.

Of the several aspects of 'not seeing' that blackness encompasses in this folio – the yogi and the king are physically separated from Chanda – the heroine's blindness to her own divine nature is pertinent here. The beloved as a beautiful woman who embodies the sacred unwittingly is a prominent figure in the cosmopolitan cultural praxis of the period under study. A Mughal painting of a delicate Rajput woman looking at herself in the mirror is framed by an inscription that proclaims her to be an idol unlike any to be found in Iran and China: "your form defies description; see yourself in the mirror". (Fig 1.3) While blackness could well capture the blinding, ineffable beauty of a divine beloved in painting, the mirror in this case dispels the woman's state of not knowing and serves to illuminate her to herself as an image and as an idol to her beholder. The image within an image is a dense revelation of truth. The mirror is a beloved motif in Sanskritic and Sufi poetics. "For Sufis, the heart is a mirror that must be polished to reflect the [divinity that a beautiful form embodies]."


Figure 1.3

The concept of the painted beloved as a site of idolatrous desire emerges early in Persian poetic traditions. Mystically inclined Muslims and the Muslim nobility posed as outliers, finding God outside of orthodox praxis. For Persian poets like Sadi, the "beloved, enchanting as a painting" was an object of worship. The beloved in Persian poetry [and painting] is typically a fresh-faced young boy. He is called the '*shahid*' (witness) and the practice of gazing at him to encounter divine beauty is termed '*shahidbazi*'.


Figure 1.4

Boy beloveds frequented early Mughal paintings but soon became a rarity as the Mughals sought to cement their presence in the Hindustani landscape as deeply Indic. Thus, they partook of Sanskritic poetic figurations of the divine in feminine form, and they drew on ancient Indic visualisations of *apsaras* to define their own image ontologies in painting (Fig. 1.4). Prince Salim's album, produced in Allahabad before Akbar's death, exemplifies the shift from depictions of male to female divine beloveds in painting. Indian Sufis in this period regarded the feminine form as a readier receptacle of divine presence and love.

Returning to the metaphor of the mirror, the complex negotiation that takes place between the image and her mirrored double, and congruently, between the image and the beholder becomes significant. Following in the vein of cultural cosmopolitanism, the mechanism by which *bhavana* functions in the mid-15th-century-CE Telugu-speaking world could articulate *how* this negotiation works. The legacy and the contemporary forms of Sanskritic poetics and aesthetic theory weighed in on cultural formations in the north and south.

A *padam* or introspective poem by Annamayya, a mid-15th-century-CE poet at Tirupati, is instructive here. "Seeing is one thing, looking is another. If both come together, that is god…What you look for is the god in you. What you see is the god out there. God is what you have in your mind."[8] Seeing and looking are different; looking comes first, an "attentiveness to a mark or sign that actively defines what one sees"[9]. What the painted beloved and beholder *look* for is the internal, fully alive part of the self that is then actualised by *bhavana* which *sees*, in the object on which the gaze rests, what has been found internally. For the painted woman, god is instantiated in the combination of seeing and seeing oneself seeing, here in the mirror. Radically, god here is an interactive creation, entirely a mind-born world, "real but not, perhaps, factual"[10]; sensitive to the context of the woman seeing herself and the beholder's heart mirroring her, god cannot be falsified.

The role of the beholder is significant; in the case of paintings as objects *tout court*, "viewers imagined themselves to endow a painting with efficacy like a priest awakening an icon. They transformed themselves in the process. Paintings idealised [artists, images, and beholders] by finding the 'pictorial' nature in them". Such a nature, in the context here, is god itself; the concepts of god in the north and south are connected in this discussion by a leap of thought.

The metaphor of mirroring created an equivalence, and thus a dialectic between art and life that intensified the experience of both in this period. If divinity could not know itself until it became an image, the painted image, while autonomous vis-à-vis other material objects, could not fully 'live' until it was mirrored or, to extend the trope of idolatry, incarnated by living subjects in the courtly milieu. The terms of art's realness, its depth, gain a new dimension.

It was the female subject in the court setting who was endowed with the qualities of the painted beloved and the divine female beloved in art, who truly held up the mirror in which the artwork could 'see' itself. Prof. Aitken states, "As for living, breathing incarnations [of art], every court was actually filled with the music of slave-girls and courtesans. These human beings were called *apsaras*." In the context of the *mehfil*, "an intimate gathering of connoisseurs…paintings were taken in hand as objects for appreciation [while] women entertainers performed archetypal femininity…Slave-girls were purchased young and their birth names were replaced with names like Gulbadan and Banitani. They were given as gifts…A worthy nobleman was expected to treat them with [the] respect [he would confer on a painting]."

Thus, the poet Narottam, in praise of Raja Man Singh of Amber, proclaims, "He treats the visual image as distinct from real women and yet his real women are created out of his words." Art was real both because it was distinct from other material life *and* because such life embodied it.

In a hypothetical situation that allows full reign to an efficacious imagination, it may be posited that *bhavana* and *pratibha* enable the beholder of a painted beloved to see her come alive in the form of a living woman and to alter the terms of realness for both painting and woman. "Falling in love with a courtesan entails a blending of internal and external states."

Upon seeing a living female form, the vivid memory of a painted woman is retrieved, and the simultaneous attentiveness to that image and to the living personage allows recognition of the latter as the former, bringing a new externalised reality into being. The woman is transformed. Shulman writes, "[The painted world] may impinge in various ways on other active worlds, notably that of everyday objects [and subjects] that surround us, since the communicative, resonant, and interactive medium of the imagination is continually bringing things into being." This is *bhavana*.

In another vein, it is the flashing radiance of the painted image in the beholder's mind that allows him to see living female forms with 'clarity', as divine truth or as possessing properties that elude everyday perception, thus turning these forms into living art. These processes could be parodied and artists recognised this. A humorous Mughal painting depicts courtiers fainting at the sight of an aged, physically grotesque courtesan who is singing and dancing for their entertainment. Against the workings of *pratibha*, they have beautified a living subject that is not inherently amenable to artistic treatment; this wilful blindness is not akin to that which allows a 'true' artist to know something without seeing it directly.

The performative transformation of living forms into art was and was not an aesthetic conceit.

"The feminine is divine. It is art and it is life. These [were and] were not separate." The feminine form – the beloved and the divine beloved – as an aesthetic reality was a world unto itself. However, such a world owed a vital part of its realness to its embodiment by living female subjects.

Art made life in its own image. Life held up a mirror to that image. The image saw its face in it. That face was an idol.

The Order and 'Disorder of Things': Aspects of Art and Empire

"The wholeness of a kingdom was known through its art." The contemporary forms of literature, like painting, patronised by Mughal and Rajput courts, evinced a sensitivity to cultural markers of the 'feminine' that undergirded political authority as did practices of femininity and masculinity in socio-aesthetic and socio-political life. All of this constitutes the depth of aesthetic production. Paintings of female relationships within courtly settings yield a hermeneutics of love in an imperial context.

The poetics of painting as object and of the painted beloved discussed above emblematise a courtly tradition of *riti*, the 'high style' of the North Indian Hindi idiom called *Braj Bhasha*. *Riti* poetry, which included *inter alia* ornamental praise addressed to royalty and rhetoric, was a vernacular revival of the Sanskrit *kavya* tradition, invested with cultural salience for Mughal and Rajput kingdoms. While the Mughals favoured Timurid and Persian legacies for statecraft, they patronised literary expression in local idioms to naturalise their presence in the Indian setting. For the Rajputs, the adoption of vernacular *kavya* was a mode of asserting their own regional power in dialogue with the inexorable Mughal dominion in the north.

Vernacular rhetoric, like Keshavdas's *Rasikapriya* and *Kavipriya* (1601) enabled the transmission of Sanskritic literary motifs, devices, and aspects of aesthetic theory, contributing to the development of an Indic courtly sensibility. As a medium of self-cultivation, an 18th-century-CE poet likened the fine points of *riti* poetics to women because both delivered instruction pleasurably. Love poetry, particularly scenes of lovers destined to anguished separation, appealed most to Persianate Hindi-knowing literati. Persian and Indic traditions shared the genre of *nakhshikh* description; however, while Persian poets described masculine beauty, Abd al Rahim wrote eloquently during Akbar's reign of the comportment and character of beautiful women, marking the Mughal cultural milieu as Indic.

Local literary idioms were received in a Persianate vein as well as on their own technical terms by Indo-Muslim connoisseurs. Even as *Vaishnava* poems of love between Radha and Krishna yielded to a Sufi hermeneutics of the soul's longing for god, and were restyled as vehicles of Muslim mystical experience, poets such as Sundar during Shah Jahan's reign, and several 18th-century-CE Mughal writers condensed domains of Sanskritic aesthetics in accessible vernacular, evincing mastery of *rasa* theory and *nayikabheda* or conventionalised scenarios of lovers' passions, piques, and trysts in their *riti* treatises, thus testifying to interest among Mughal nobility in cultivating systematic expertise in Indic aesthetic systems. Such rigorous connoisseurship, however, was limited to a select coterie of Indo-Muslim readers.

While the evolution of *riti* highlights significant Hindu-Muslim cultural synergies, a wider range of *riti* genres including political narrative and historiography was deployed by the Rajput courts. Ultimately, for Mughal literati, though *Braj Bhasha* and an understanding of Sanskritic aesthetics was important to become a *rasika* and assimilate in courtly life, such knowledge supplemented, not supplanted, affiliation to Persian literary traditions.

The precepts of Sanskritic aesthetics explicated in the first section would have been familiar through *Braj Bhasha* to several Indo-Muslim cultural agents, though not necessarily to painters. The relationship between theories of *pratibha* and *bhavana*, and between *bhavana* and *rasa* were refined in treatises of the 17th century CE at the Mughal court of Delhi.

As such, Mughal painting occupies a spectrum between conventions of 'naturalism' and 'stylisation' with its mostly single narrative registers, muted tones, illusionistic rendition of mass, nature, and atmospheric recession on one hand; on the other, it condenses narrative spaces and uses planar geometry to organise

compositions and reveal 'cosmic order'. Such painting acknowledged, since Akbar's reign, a controlled voracity for the 'foreignness' of European techniques. That said, Prof. Aitken writes, "Both Mughal and Rajput art are suspicious of mimesis, but the Mughals played that suspicion off against dazzling illusionistic effects. Rajput painters were much more rarely illusionistic. Rather, they tended to engage in a careful attention to nature that only minimally produced perceptual effects."[11]

Thus, though no easy binary exists between the ethos of Mughal and Rajput styles despite visual differences, the precepts discussed above are more resonant for Rajput renditions of such narratives of amorous and divine-mystical love as the *Rasamanjari*, *Rasikapriya*, and *Gita Govinda* that created a localised imperative for artists "to picture mental and divine or visionary realms and…demonstrably to distinguish the world in their pictures from the observable world of their viewers"[12]. These paintings, with their stylisation through use of multiple narrative registers, block-colour backgrounds, and idealised human forms, differed from Mughal visualisations of 'Hindu imagery' on grounds, it seems, of aesthetic intentionality rather than politics. However, they came to adopt, selectively, the use of atmospheric background, pockets of shading that open up space, and rudimentary perspective by the 18th century CE. As such, Rajput painting's "overall tendency"[13] in this period was towards "visual poetics"[13].

The fragmented Mughal courts under Muhammad Shah (r. 1719–1748 CE) built their ateliers by patronising artists migrating there from several regions, and thus imbibed certain Rajput conventions that answered to Sufi poetics of mystic love. Artists from Delhi migrated to other Islamic North Indian regions and 'late-Mughal' themes and several conventions were embraced by Rajput courts. Thus, discrete styles were not by themselves significant; what mattered was their cultural synergy and efficacy in time and place.

Prof. Aitken notes that the term *bhava* – and occasionally *rasa* – is used in Rajput painting inscriptions and records. The *bhava* that scenes of court life, as compared to love imagery, evoke is not a transcendent universalised emotion but dependent on "the viewer's particular knowledge of local people, places…events"[14]. Prof. Aitken concludes that, "Rasa was relevant to 17th- and 18th-century paintings… Ultimately…rasa was not the singular aim of painting, nor were the mechanics of [aesthetic theory always painting's] means, but rasa, as an idea about art, was current within the intellectual culture of paintings, and paintings were…designed to move viewers to experience feelings."[14]

For the Mughals, paintings of female divine beloveds encoded a fertile tension. They marked the images' ontology as Indic while underscoring political otherness. In the vein of the Persians who conceived of *shahids* as pale-faced Turks and themselves sometimes as Hindu lovers, 'divine' women, transposed into auspicious paintings from figurations of the Indic *apsara*, were conceived of as foreign. The term 'foreigner' marked a complex identity for the Mughals; in different contexts it encompassed Rajputs, Deccanis, Europeans – and even Central Asians, as the Mughals sought to naturalise their Indian presence. A Hindu 'other' could well have been a royal family member through marital alliances.

Moving from painting, the divinity that inhered in the Mughal emperor was accessible to his subjects through the Indic ritual of imperial *darshan*. The act of beholding the divine emperor made a woman of the imperial subject, even as in the Persianate aesthetic tradition, the painter Mir Sayyid Ali portrayed himself as a beautiful boy in expressing his love for the emperor Humayun. The performance of femininity by Mughal subjects was rooted in three practices.

First, the conventions of Persian polity designated the emperor as *padshah*, a term connoting lordship and possession, by which the king becomes bridegroom of the cosmos, and royal subjects become his brides and worshippers. Second, divine kingship was a devotional trope; subjects were akin to Sufis who become brides of Islam, and *bhakts* of Krishna who transform into *gopis* through ecstatic devotion. Third, it became a distinctly Southasian veneration of sovereignty through the *riti* tradition; the poet Sundar in panegyric to the emperor Shah Jahan 'observed' that the women of the *zenana* became bewitched at the sight of their liege as if they were lifeless paintings or beautifully carved in stone. It was as though they had locked eyes on an *idol* of Kamadeva or an *image* of Shah Jahan. The emperor here, as emperor, was always already an aesthetic ideal. On the part of the women, the seeing of god in the personage of the emperor requires the activation of *bhavana*, a blending of internal and external states as explicated in the part on divine beloveds. The act of seeing the divine regent locates their own 'pictorial' nature and makes divine images of them. By poetic hyperbole, the 'women of the *zenana*' could refer to all imperial subjects, regardless of gender. Another poetic source for Mughals of the lover as woman was the Deccani Urdu tradition, wherein male poets wrote in a female voice to access feminine subjectivity.

Thus, gender 'guising' was a form of aesthetic-imperial agency, laced with devotional connotations. The experience of love towards an emperor was, in its intensity, a test of hierarchical allegiance. It was a mark of self-discipline in the face of – and self-exaltation through – strong emotion, not of sexual orientation. As

such, actual sexual preferences were unimportant in the socio-aesthetic realm. In the context of the *mehfil*, where masculine and feminine sexual behaviour were on display in performance, connoisseurs responded to eroticism as an aesthetic idea, and not based on their sexual orientation. In Persian verse, which continued to be patronised by Mughal literati, as well as to a degree in contemporary Urdu poetics, male beloveds, often considered pre-gendered, figured significantly, and a connoisseur's 'heterosexual masculinity' was 'left behind' by 'living through' the desire for them but actual homosexual preferences were not indulged. The Mughals savoured visual and musical art, and *riti* poetry in the Indic vein, with its emphasis on ideals of feminine beauty and female beloveds. While such art elicited 'heterosexual' connoisseurship, it also conferred femininity on male imperial subjects in the poetic-imperial realm. Courtesans who often cross-dressed in 'living performances' of art embodied both Persianate and Indic ideals. Thus, depending on cultural affiliation, love objects and loving subjects were both differentiated in terms of gender.

The historian Rosalind O'Hanlon demonstrates that during Akbar's reign, gender roles for men in the socio-political sphere were strictly regulated even as Persian verse flourished. Akbar's practices of imperiality built on medieval Islamic ethical thought, particularly on a 13th-century-CE treatise titled *Akhlaq-i-Nasiri* in Persian-language-form.

Akhlaq connotes innate virtuous disposition. Akbar's polity drew on *akhlaqi* themes that emphasised the 'natural' purity of the male body, and cemented men to the imperial service by securing the right of all morally perfected imperial administrators to exercise strict authority over, and command obedience from, their specific households and political domains. The model transcended religion and region and served to institute Akbar's authority as the ultimate father-ruler of his kingdom, severing his dependence on orthodox court praxis.

Ironically, in Abul Fazl's *Akbarnama*, this Islamic paradigm is recorded as being deployed and restyled to eulogise patriarchal and heterosexual male virtue in contrast to the 'sexual transgression' of Northern Turanians and Deccani Iranian-influenced courts, and to construct a distinct male sexuality in the service of local North Indian patriotism. Heterosexual marriages were conceived of as aligning sexual and spiritual union, and sexual pleasure was limited ideally to procreative acts. Homosexuality's 'intransigent' existence in courtly settings was acknowledged but, to iterate, not indulged.

Akbar himself performed a controlled masculinity through *inter alia* the bodily practice of hunting. As an Indic political idiom appropriated by the emperor, hunting, rather than demonstration of raw physical courage and martial rage on the battlefield, was a form of self-expression that aligned bodily action with several inner spiritual purposes and attested to his divine nature. Hunting "provided a chance to hold direct communion with wandering…ascetics…As a form of paternal supervision of the whole kingdom, testing its men and discovering its secrets [it was] a means of divine worship"[15]. It allowed the emperor to appear in close communion with the North Indian ecological landscape. The body was not a receptacle but an instrument of the soul, a microcosm of household and kingdom, and thus 'masculine' ethics was an embodied, not abstract, discourse.

This distinctive ethos of masculinity weakened during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan, and in those after Aurangzeb; their self-conscious cultivation of courtly pleasure that emphasised refined artistic sensibilities and gentlemanly connoisseurship allowed aesthetic ideals of femininity to mature. The 18th century CE witnessed a rise of female patronage and connoisseurship of art in late-Mughal courts, as discussed in the next section.

Figure 2.1

Practices of femininity and masculinity coalesce in paintings of court ritual. Shifting focus to the Rajput milieu, large paintings on paper executed at Nagaur under the reign of Maharaja Bakhat Singh (r. 1725–1751 CE) depict the ruler and the women of his *zenana* partaking formally of courtly entertainment. In one painting (Fig. 2.1), the king is seated slightly off-centre while his wives stand decorously behind him, some holding fly-whisks. The entertainers are seated in front of him while other groups of women occupy the space around a pond. Birds abound on blossoming trees in the background to signify an experience of pleasure for the painted characters and to intensify the beholders' pleasure. Layers of hierarchy are evinced: the king's wives stand upright in modest *ghagra-cholis* while the seated entertainers, lower in rank to them are more provocatively dressed in 'Mughlai' *churidars* and transparent skirts; ranks prevailed among entertainers too, with certain musicians performing only in the *zenana* and others, mostly Muslim women, occupying a liminal relationship between the *zenana* and the king's *darbars*. The latter category, though enjoying privilege of movement, were lower in rank than their *zenana*

counterparts and were 'accessible' for male sexual pleasure. Cross-dressing prevailed among pre-puberty dancing girls and dancers escaped the destiny of normative marriage by virtue of their roles, underscoring their identity as art. Thus, the partaking of pleasure was regulated like any other imperial activity and was enmeshed in social power relationships.


Figure 2.2

Another painting frames shifting centre-periphery relationships between men and women (Fig. 2.2). The king occupies the centre of the top-third of the composition, his wives around him behind *pardah*. In the case of entertainers, however, the women dancers and drummers are in the centre below the king, with male musicians surrounding them. At Rajput courts, Mughals performed the roles of entertainers only, occupying a 'periphery' vis-a-vis the Hindu wives of the *zenana*. In all these paintings, the Rajput wives stand or sit in imagistic perfection 'as if they have locked eyes on an idol'. The experiencing of pleasure, here, was ideally a test of hierarchical allegiance, outer comportment and etiquette as well as inner self-discipline and virtue in the face of arts that tantalised the senses and aroused intense emotional responses. As such, the Nagaur court, like its other Rajput counterparts, was eulogised in painting and poetry as the abode of Vishnu or Indra and paintings of courtly entertainment were not simply representations of court activity but actualised or 'brought into being' an ethos of godly order, plenitude and magnificence, intensifying the beauty of court ritual.


Figure 2.3

A Mughal painting by the artist Bishandas around 1620 CE encapsulates "a bird's eye view of the well-guarded *zenana* at the birth of Prince Salim [showing] women of different ethnicities with [individualised] faces"[16] (Fig. 2.3). In the Mughal worldview, the *zenana* was conceptualised as a microcosm of the world; it staged empire as a "cohesion and ordering of difference". As per Abul Fazl, the *zenana* was sacred because it tested masculine propriety, offering the emperor an opportunity to display his 'higher wisdom' by rising above worldly dependency on carnal pleasure; and to protect 'vulnerable' women from external dangers and safeguard their chastity from internal temptations. A painting of Jahangir and his son Prince Khurram in Nur Jahan's quarters at the Ram Bagh Palace, Agra, underscores this Mughal conception of order and invites attention to 'naturalism' in Mughal compositions (Fig. 2.4). The empress wears a stern face, and above the wine bottles in a niche of a pavilion wall behind them is a mural of the Madonna, signifying the sacrality of her 'inner' and 'outer' space. Jahangir's poetry inscribed on the wall indicates that this is a space the empress shares with her husband and the halo around his head set against cloud motifs on a mattress testifies to his resplendence as divine regent. The mural of cypresses circled by flowering vines on the pavilion wall promises the embrace of beloveds.


Figure 2.4


Figure 2.5

This 'naturalistic' portrayal of 'natural' order is confounded intriguingly by a later painting attributed to the artist Govardhan of a drunken Jahangir celebrating Holi in the raucous 'feminine' setting of Nur Jahan's quarters (Fig. 2.5). On the pavilion wall, a mural shows a bull and his mate lying together as opposed to being seated opposite each other like in Bishandas's painting of formal address between empress and emperor. The haloed Jahangir cannot stand upright in his stupor, and the imperial axis of both painting and cosmos is reeling though he still occupies the central top-third of the composition that is the seat of authority in imperial paintings. He is being supported to an empty flower-strewn bed – a reference to *nayikabheda* paintings – by his queen, and the promise of passionate union belies any allusions to immaculate conception.

The women in the foreground, wearing Rajput and Mughlai clothing, are absorbed in play, contributing splendidly to imperial 'disorder'. The theme

of blindness and sight is resonant here. One Rajput woman in full composure has caught her Mughal *saheli* in a stranglehold by the neck and is pouring wine through her lips while the latter yields to pleasure with half-closed eyes even as she reaches into a pouch of coloured powder at her waist to blind her 'aggressor'. A third woman looks on at this performance through eyes stung by *gulal*. Women fill and squirt *pichkaris* of colour, contributing to the sexual thematic of the painting. The woman with the wine bottle and a female drummer who performs a masculine role here look out of the picture-frame onto the beholder. A close look at the faces of all these women reveals them as generic beauties and not individualised figures. This painting is aware of itself as painting as spectacle.

Even so, European historians have interpreted it as an eyewitness account of Jahangir's mortifying decadence as emperor. As such, it was most likely painted a decade after Jahangir's death, and renditions such as this produced during Shah Jahan's reign were critical of his predecessor's unorthodox imperial practices, among which were the political and administrative licenses granted to the empress.

However, in another register, it conveys authority. This painting is part of an album page, and the calligraphy on its verso speaks, in a Sufi vein, of drunkards in their *masti* as possessing more divine knowledge than seemingly decorous *sheikhs*. Moreover, the theme of Holi and the depictions of dominant Hindu women in the *zenana* marks this work as an Indic composition. In such a context, Jahangir embodies Krishna in relation to his *gopis* as the supreme *nayaka*; he also becomes the ideal Hindu king whose yielding to pleasure is a virtue and mark of noble strength. For Hindi poets of the time, gods and kings embodied the nine *rasas* and "should get drunk on pleasure, knowingly, but with passion". Shah Jahan's critique of his father's 'licentiousness' is belied in the poetic-imperial register by the poet and singer Kavindra whose *drupads* sensualise Shah Jahan as a drunken beloved who played Holi among dancing youthful beauties with passion and abandon.

"Thus, an imperial painting of imperial 'disorder' is finally a conundrum" necessitating depth of vision to unveil it as a tense, liminal presence between political attitudes and metaphor; both are significant registers of painting's realness.

Figure 2.6

Even though Jahangir occupies the seat of authority in the painting above, an important aspect of it is that the women playing amongst themselves are replete in communion with one another. The theme of women's relationships with one another is explored fervently in paintings from the end of the 17th century CE and into the early 19th century CE. Visualised in pairs or in groups across styles and locations, these *sahelis* (technically maidservants in Hindi poetry) provide fresh access to the depth of feminine subjectivity.

In the wall paintings of the Hadi Rani Mahal of Nagaur, executed in large format with the use of *araish* – a mixture of seashells and eggshells – to create a marble-like patina, *apsara*-like images dominate the frontal space while women in pairs occupy the facades at the back (Fig. 2.6). This provides a sense of their hierarchy in relation to other women and to the king. The relation of women to the ruler was that of multiplicity acknowledging the overarching presence of the single divine regent. While this was the case when the king occupied these rooms, in his absence, the *sahelis* are complete among themselves without male viewers whose gaze upon them is, as such, not considered voyeuristic. In archetypal *saheli* paintings here, one is dressed in Rajput and the other in Mughlai attire. Evocations of *ragini* imagery where one woman plays a musical instrument while the other listens rapt, and of *shalabhanjika* iconography where one woman holds a fecund branch to indicate that she is not a representation of a living woman but is a garden herself, blooming in the presence of her beloved, become resonant here (Fig. 2.7).

Figure 2.7

These compositions, and the trope of *sahelis* in North Indian paintings on paper during this time owe their ontology to several preceding iconographies and themes. One source of these contemporary works is *mithuna* images, the auspicious coming together of masculine and feminine graces through gaze and embrace (Fig. 2.8). Mughal

Figure 2.8


Figure 2.9

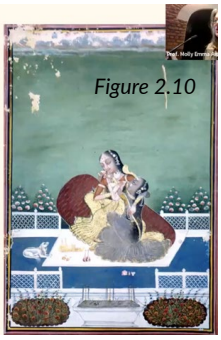


Figure 2.10

paintings of '*saheli mithunas*' display archetypal union with Rajput otherness. Large early paintings on cloth of *gopis* in pairs or groups signify that their bhakti for Krishna has been cathected onto one another (Fig. 2.9). A Mughal painting dated 1781 CE presents two women in a loving embrace, evoking *mithuna* imagery and transmuting the association with *gopis* into the cosmopolitan context of a *majlis* (gathering) (Fig. 2.10). Another Mughal *majlis* composition shows two women gazing amorously at each other, each meditating on the other's divine beauty in the Sufi tradition of *shahidbazi* (Fig. 2.11). The Devanagari inscription on the verso states that they are drunk; intoxication, for Sufis, granted accessibility to mystical experience. These 'illuminations' of female beauties seeking divinity in others of their own gender were considered auspicious and were patronised by male connoisseurs seeking a conduit to their own 'higher subjectivity'. A Deccani Mughal-style composition, dated 1668 CE, of a *zenana majlis* portraying several women

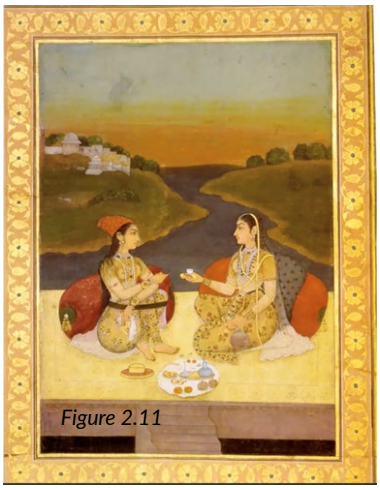


Figure 2.11

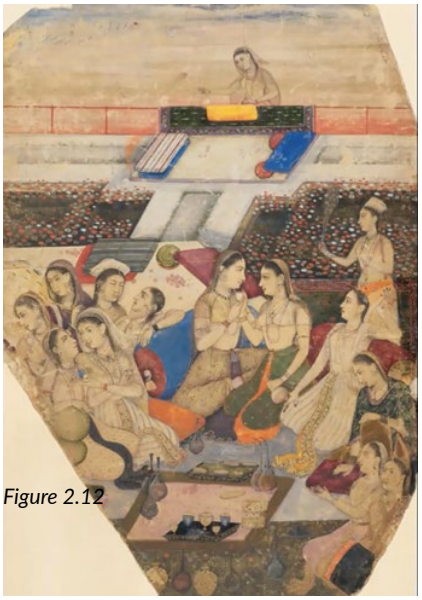


Figure 2.12


Figure 2.13

partaking of wine and music on rooftops, with one woman dressed as a young boy, draw parallels with scenes of the *mardana majlis* or *mehfil* where Sufi ascetics and *shahids* were present to test outer propriety and inner regulation by intellect in the face of sensual pleasure (Figs. 2.12 and 2.13). The *zenana majlis* as a *mise-en-scene* for 'feminine' love is iterated in a composition by the Bikaneri artist Ruknuddin (Fig. 2.14). At the Sheesh Mahal in Nagaur, *majlis* compositions on the wall accompany depictions of wine bottles, clouds and lightning around paired women on the ceiling to signify the intoxication and volatility that women experienced in one another's company (Figs. 2.15 and 2.16). Paintings of *sahelis* occupy a spectrum between comportment and sensual abandon, or sometimes only the latter pole.

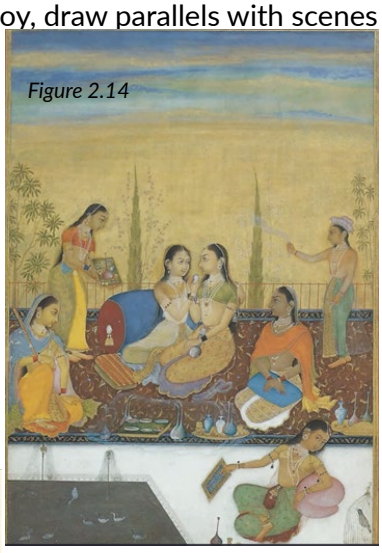


Figure 2.14

As such, the earliest painting of *sahelis* is modelled on a composition by the artist Manohar of a personage thought to be Prince Murad in the embrace of a Rajput princess. Manohar's painting is a romanticisation of the Indian landscape's conquest by Mughals, an allegory of Persianate and Indic confluence. The Mughal *sahelis* are almost nude and the carpet below them is alive with animal imagery signifying their carnal


Figure 2.15

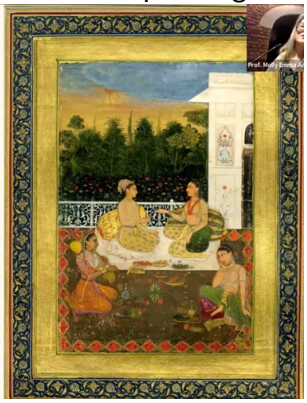



Figure 2.16

Figure 2.17

Figure 2.18

is union (Fig. 2.17). Moving into the late 18th century CE, a painting from Bundi-Kota of two women embracing inscribed as a union between Rajput and Mughal royalty (Fig. 2.18). At this historical juncture of political fragmentation in the north, such alliances were no longer a social reality. Thus, the realness of several Rajput and Mughal *saheli* paintings inheres in keeping historical memory alive aesthetically despite altered political practice.

Visual differences – vis-à-vis line, evocation of mass, tonality, and background rendition – on a spectrum between 'naturalism' and 'stylisation' prevail between these Mughal and Rajput paintings. They are less prominent in courts like Nagaur and Bikaner (Fig. 3.1, right), as compared to certain works from Jodhpur (Fig. 2.19) and Bundi-Kota (Fig. 2.18).

Figure 2.19

The proliferation of *sahelis* in painting was sustained by invoking layers of associations with or repeating earlier potent compositional models and displaying subtle singularity in each iteration. Here, realness inhered not only in the painted image as a reality unto itself but in painting itself as a social object that owed its efficacy to what Prof. Aitken terms 'conditions of knowledge', where images were 'brought into being' through a painter's familiarity with the legacies and contemporary forms of artistic production that were then transmuted into local styles. Compositions travelled with painters; they were copied by the use of *charbas* and through the practice of *nazari* or careful looking and memorisation. Their resonance for connoisseurs depended on the latter's familiarity with cultural history which, ideally, complemented that of the painter's. Old and new were not binaries. This confluence of referentiality and singularity is also underscored in aesthetic theory as a source of *rasa*.

Figure 2.20

Several renditions of the *zenana majlis* trace their genealogy to Govardhan's painting discussed above. One painting finds Mughal women replete in one another's company against the presence of an empty, rose-strewn bed that proffers connotations of eroticism contained among women or perhaps signifies the missing sovereign without whom sexual union is not possible (Fig. 2.20, centre). Another painting renders women bathing languorously while the central axis is occupied by the women in Govardhan's painting who thematise gazing and blindness – one woman 'embraces' another in a vice-like grip while a third attempts to look at this raucousness through eyes shielded from the colour her companion flings at them. There is no male authority, drunken or otherwise, to 'balance' the mayhem (Fig. 2.20, right).

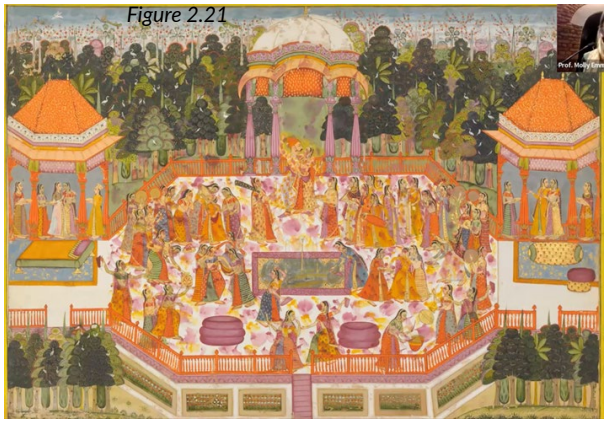


Figure 2.21

In the legacy of Govardhan's masterpiece, Bakhat Singh is situated at the centre of a Nagauri painting, in his wife's embrace, celebrating Holi. Occupying the central courtyard and corner pavilions, Mughal and Rajput women intoxicate each other, some holding their companions forcibly; *sahelis* blind their playmates with colour and several figures stand in a decorous *mithuna*-like embrace (Fig. 2.21). In another painting of a pleasure-scene, *mithuna*-like *sahelis* 'usurp' the central top-third of the composition while the

maharaja glides serenely in a barge on a water-body below them with women entertainers seated submissively before him; pairs of women facing each other accompany him in smaller boats (Fig. 2.22). Thus, tension thrives between male and female authority in several *saheli* paintings.


Figure 2.22

In Lucknow, a vernacular genre of poetry emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries CE, called *Rekhti*, where poets often cross-dressed and wrote in a female voice of women's love for one another. Such love was described as a fascination with one's own likeness, leaving aside minor differences in dress and skin colour; the metaphor of doubling was emphasised. For the poet Rangin, *dugana* refers to a double fruit or nut from a single seed that women exchanged to proclaim their love for each other. However, this doubling of sameness existed in tension with a celebration of cultural mixture; *Rekhti* evinced confluence between the vernacular tongue, Persian words and motifs, and colloquial Urdu. Interestingly, the lewdness and 'homo-eroticism' of such poetry made it unsuitable for performance by women. It was relished by male patrons.

Saheli paintings were far wider in reach than this localised poetic genre, preoccupying artists in several Mughal, Rajput, and Deccan courts. Like *Rekhti*, they were a staging of cohesive empire through difference and the anachronistic performance of cultural union in a splintered historical milieu. In contrast to practices of femininity and masculinity in the aesthetic and ethical register discussed above, they were *less* concerned with hierarchical allegiance, exploring the intensity of love and intimacy among equals.

The *bhava* elicited by this vernacular, cosmopolitan, tensile, worldly genre was both referential of and vastly variant to that evoked by Sufi and *riti*-filtered Sanskritic poetics of lovers and beloveds. To iterate, love in the aesthetic realm did not index actual sexual orientation. Nevertheless, the experience of amorous emotion was titrated through the specificity of gender, and feminine subjectivity was considered as understanding its highest forms of expression.

Potent Signification and Re-signification: Aspects of Art and Female Authority

The volatile political milieu of the 18th century CE frames later *saheli* paintings in Mughal and Rajput courts, bewildering terms of engagement with earlier compositional models. Furthermore, the discussion of yoginis in *saheli* paintings of this period traces these ambivalent figures to their cultural ontology in the Deccan. The aesthetics of yoginis bewilders tropes of lovers and beloveds, and crystallises conceptions of female alterity that were parallel to and sometimes intersected with several ideals and practices of femininity discussed above.

When Maharaja Anup Singh of Bikaner, under the auspices of emperor Aurangzeb, served as Mughal governor in the Deccan during the 1660s CE to strive for control in the south, he acquired several paintings and albums from that region. Among them was the Mughal-style *zenana majlis* composition dated 1668 CE referenced above. This compositional model served as the basis for a *saheli* painting executed more than a century later in the 1770s CE by the Bikaneri artist Ahmed (Fig 3.1, right).


Figure 3.1

After Aurangzeb's death in 1707 CE, the Mughal empire witnessed a precipitous decline and fragmentation; several Mughal successor-states emerged in, *inter alia*, Awadh, Hyderabad, Mysore, and Punjab. The Rajputs responded ineffectually to this divisiveness, embroiled as they were in their own internal rivalries. However, they secured governorship of Malwa, Sindh, and Gujarat by rebelling against the Mughals between 1708–1710 CE. Thus, Ahmed's *saheli* painting, to iterate, keeps aflame a voracity for cultural configurations of Mughal 'otherness' at a time when Mughal-Rajput marital alliances had become an awkward history; after Aurangzeb's death, only one such marriage was recorded. The empty bed in the central top-third of the painting – a legacy of Govardhan's Holi tableaux – connotes resonantly the resounding weakness of Mughal sovereignty, a pronounced shift from a long *duree* in history. This painting enacts, perhaps, political critique rather than nostalgia.

Emptiness and de-centring as compositional devices point to the bewildering context of aesthetic production

during this period. In an 18th-century-CE Lucknow court painting, the empty central axis mourns the missing male sovereign, while in the foreground, a begum sits slightly off-centre, in a position of authority, smoking a hookah while female dancers and musicians entertain her. In the recesses of the painting, the palace opens onto a landscape where armies prepare for battle (Fig. 3.2).


Figure 3.2

As such, certain regional queens and courtesans amassed stupendous wealth and power as the Mughal empire dispersed due to invasions and divisive succession disputes that weakened male imperial authority. The *tawaif* Udham Bai alias Nawab Qudsia Begum became wife of emperor Muhammad Shah and assumed charge of imperial governance after his death. Famous singers like Noor Bai patronised by Muhammad Shah became wealthy enough to commission popular havelis. Nawab Asif ud Daulah fled to Lucknow after his mother usurped the treasuries at the court of Faizabad. These women commissioned the erection of mosques, temples, bazaars, caravanserais, and pleasure-gardens.


Figure 3.3

Significantly, they patronised painters and practiced connoisseurship in this period. The paintings in which they are depicted perform gender-guising as a melding of aesthetic and political practice. In them, they assume masculine attitudes, smoking hookahs in public which was a prerogative of kings and high-ranking courtiers (Fig. 3.3, right) or lie stretched out authoritatively on divans while gazing at handsome young seducers who are really women in male garb (fig 3.4, right). Cross-dressing was central to these images and urbane *tawaifs* who posed for paintings wore turbans as a mark of their power (Fig. 3.5). The practice of hunting which, as discussed earlier, attested to the emperor's divine masculinity, was appropriated by women. However, the political efficacy of women during this period was not a clean rupture in history; it culminated from a long Mughal tradition in which certain royal residents of the *zenana* wielded influence over affairs of state and governance.

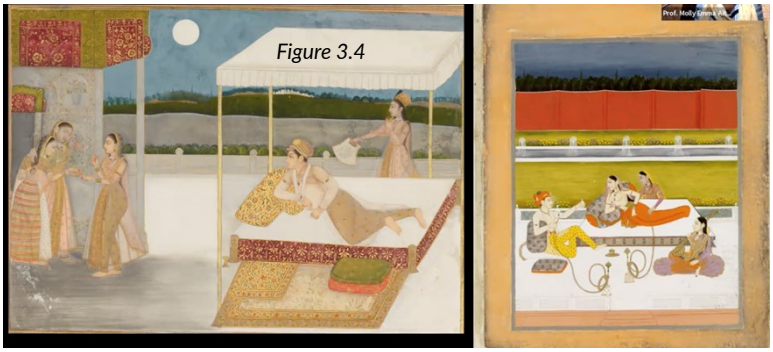


Figure 3.4

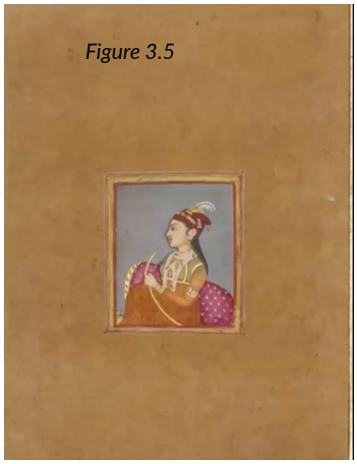


Figure 3.5

Mughal domestic life encompassed both public and private realms in a nuanced manner even after the *zenana* became a physically sequestered space during and after Akbar's reign. Women of the *zenana* responded agentially in contradictory, complex ways to the ideals of sacredness prescribed for them in hegemonic chronicles like the *Akbarnama* and the *Ain-i-Akbari*. The historiographer Ruby Lal writes, "Senior imperial women [such as Gulbadan Begum and Salimeh Sultan Begum]...took over positions of public authority at several junctures...they counselled and mediated between dissenting kinsmen...they frequently arbitrated and made suggestions on public matters..."[17] Akbar's mother, the 'Queen Empress' Hamideh Banu Begum, served as governor of Delhi in 1581. Nur Jahan's political prowess belongs to this context.

Royal *zenana* residents patronised female dancers, musicians, and male priests. Hunting, too, was the province of certain women in earlier periods, and Mughal and Deccani images of Chand Bibi, the 16th-century-CE queen of Ahmadnagar, hawking on horseback are a quintessential example here. However, it is striking that female authority is depicted in imperial paintings only from the late 17th century CE onwards.

The intimacies experienced among *sahelis* in several paintings exists in tension with hierarchical allegiance to other women. 18th-century-CE *saheli* paintings in which powerful begums are present are concerned with more

than staging cultural mixture in an imperial milieu; the presence of yoginis in several of these works bewilders the beholder's hermeneutic act. A Lucknow painting of this period, drawing on oft-repeated compositions, presents a begum pulling on a hookah to the right of the tableaux while *sahelis* and entertainers in Rajput and Mughlai attire surround her in pairs or groups. A young petite female yogini, fully-clothed, leans on a swing under a tree to the far left, performing *tapas* while a group of nearly-nude, ashen-coloured yoginis, young and old, sit below her in the foreground. The central top-third of the composition is devoid of human figures (Fig. 3.6).

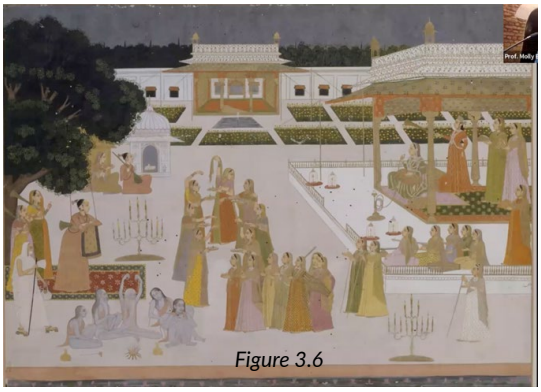


Figure 3.6

The yogini occupies a specific context in Mughal and Rajput paintings of this period. As such, yoginis are an ancient presence in Southasian religious traditions; understanding their semiotics in North Indian paintings and grasping their ambivalence in terms of gender, morality, and social belonging entails an exploration of their rich conception by the 17th-century-CE cultural milieu of Bijapur and Golconda.


Figure 3.7

The Deccan, which represented a generative 'otherness' for the north, was a largely Persianate milieu though it invested seriously in several Sanskritic aesthetic traditions. Bijapur's celebrated ruler Sultan Ibrahim Adil Shah II (r. 1580–1627 CE) fostered cultural synergy at his court; he delved into *rasa* theory, composed verses to the goddess Saraswati, sang Hindu *bhajans* and wore *rudraksha* beads. In panegyric, the poets of his court were described as budding flowers on whom the sultan's gaze lingered to draw out their genius and savour its unique *rasa*. It was in this context that the seminal 'Bijapur yogini' painting of the early 17th century CE was composed in Persianate style (Fig. 3.7).

Towering in the foreground, attired in 'Indian' orange, she is centred between poppies and water-lilies that do not impinge upon her. The verdant yet austere landscape 'brings into being' an independent reality; the flowers are taller than the trees, the sky and the river at her feet are pure gold, and she is placed against a silent white city that she has left behind. She is perceived as a devotee of Shiva, as a 'beloved' of mystics, or as one of the immortal yoginis with occult powers who grant a dangerous *darshan* to kings. Perhaps sworn to celibacy, her eroticism is cathected onto a mynah bird who meets her gaze while proffering a morsel towards her mouth.

"Yoginis were a ubiquitous presence in the art of the south, and bore a strong association with music." Bijapur was an important centre for musical composition at the turn of the 17th century CE and several of its yogini paintings evoke *Ragamala* iconography though the figures have an independent existence as wandering musicians. In certain compositions, yoginis seated on rocky knolls hold birds, aquatic life, deer, and wild beasts in thrall to the sound of their musical instruments; they are "sovereigns of the natural world". Such works were referenced in mid-18th-century-CE Nagpur *Ragamala* paintings. A heroine wanders in a wild landscape, leaving behind walled courtly gardens which are the proper setting of lovers' passion and union; she embodies *Todi Ragini* because the force of unrequited love that her *veena's* music generates makes of her a sexual renunciate who, like the Bijapur yogini, has set her heart on god.


Figure 3.8

Anup Singh acquired several pages of a *Ragamala* manuscript from Bijapur, and the painters who travelled with him learned Deccani styles of composition. The Bikaneri artist Nathu painted a yogini in 1687 CE, the year that Anup Singh was granted the title 'Maharaja' (Fig. 3.8). Layers of association prevail here. The yogini references the *kuladevis* worshipped by Rajput clans for material prowess, and this painting is an ode to her blessings. Her deer-antler necklace indicates that, like the Bijapur yogini, she is a devotee of Shiva and her peacock fan identifies her as an acolyte on the path to becoming a *nath* yogini; such yoginis possessed occult power through *tapas*, and lived in an austere, unorthodox manner outside of courts and cities, conferring benediction on kings and imperial subjects. As such, she looks diminutive, not emanating the forbidding presence of her Bijapur counterpart. The pearls around her top-notch, and the curls cascading down her cheeks are traces of courtly life, though a shawl around her torso wraps away her sexuality. Poets imagined yoginis to embrace celibacy when hope of union with a beloved is lost. The yellow background shading into crimson iterates a

Deccani palette, and the sulphur of which yellow pigment is prepared signifies divine femininity. However, the painting's format is of a Mughal portrait rather than of iconic figuration, and she is a foreigner in all three kingdoms.


Figure 3.9

Sultan Quli Qutb Shah (r. 1612–1625 CE) of Golconda (Fig. 3.9), another Deccan region that captured the north's imagination, composed poetry as a woman yearning for her beloved with maddening intensity, exceeding the controlled passion with which Mughal imperial 'devotees' adored their sovereign. "The woman's voice becomes a mirror in which he sees himself; he returns her passion with an extremity that makes a woman of him." Male poets of the Deccan inscribed themselves as *sakhis* or companions of their female creations. Maharaja Anup Singh's atelier carried the Deccani fascination with experiences of women's intimacies north. The *zenana majlis* composition by the artist Ruknuddin mentioned above was painted during his stay in the Deccan (Fig. 2.14).

The exploration of these experiences in the decades that followed incorporated visualisations of yoginis. A Deccani-style painting by the Bikaneri artist Murad, a successor of Nathu, reveals a yogini standing lower in the foreground than her Bijapur counterpart and devoid of iconic presence (Fig. 3.10). Though perhaps celibate, she is a courtly seductress. Imbued with masculine energy, she is framed by female slaves and entertainers in Mughlai attire, and is encountered in a decorous Rajput garden. The sulphurous yellow endowed with divine efficacy is absent here; this yogini offers courtly diversion rather than granting *darshan*. Yoginis in several 18th-century-CE paintings "withdrew their address to kings" and explored instead "the intimate society of women".

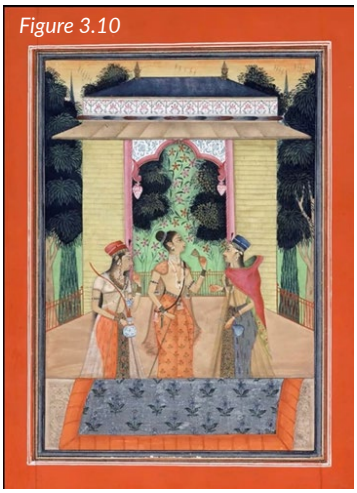


Figure 3.10

As such, yoginis proliferated in Mughal and Rajput painting of this period "as women's companions, their spiritual guides…as powerful ascetics" and subversive renegades. They were understood more as characters in everyday social life than as isolated immortal beings. In the *Rasikapriya*, the female ascetic or *sanyaasini* is among the heroine's go-betweens or *sakhis*. In several paintings, yoginis occupy an ambivalent social position. They are framed as female entertainers in *saheli* paintings ranked, ironically, with the sexually available musicians and dancers who could enter and leave the *zenana* at will (Fig. 3.11). Certain paintings deploy the yoginis' celibacy as a sexual presence; when *zenana* gatherings indulge in intoxicants, yoginis 'centre' the composition by assuming a male role (Fig. 3.12). Their path of renunciation, paradoxically, makes them amenable here to social gender-guising. A provocative northern painting shows a bearded yogini among a moonlit congregation of yoginis in an austere rural location (Fig. 3.13). Yoginis in *saheli* paintings are often painted with delicate faces, adorned with pearls and *henna*, but they are flat-chested. The poet Lal's Hindi *Ragamala* text describes *Malhar Ragini* as having become an ascetic on separation from her beloved; her body assumes masculine attributes, she is smeared with ashes and wears a deerskin loincloth.


Figure 3.11


Figure 3.12


Figure 3.13

In all, yoginis in such northern painting were "pictured as ambiguously masculine and feminine, mortal and immortal, sexual and ascetic, and free of the constraints of society"[18].

An 18th-century-CE Bikaneri painting details two women,

presided over by a yogini who stands to the far-right of the composition, tying a cotton cloth around a tree-trunk to be blessed with children. The yogini addresses their prayers and, as such, parallel registers and practices of femininity are evinced here (Fig. 3.14).

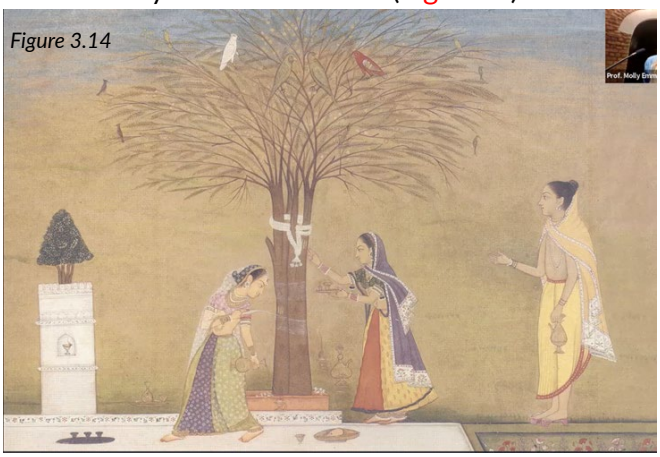


Figure 3.14


Figure 3.15

The relationship between yoginis and women living in a conventional imperial context is explored with vigour in 18th-century-CE paintings at the Mughal court of Lucknow. The artist Mihr Chand renders a disquieting tableaux set in a dense, shadowy, moonlit forest (Fig. 3.15). The women who congregate at the far-left of the painting are from an elite family; they are far from the comforts of courtly life. A yogini stands next to them conversing with her companion and facing two imperial princes in hunting-green who stand behind bushes at the far-right. From right to left, a theatre of conflicting gazes is set in motion; it is opened up by the men whose erotically-charged gaze violates the women's private circle and is closed down by the austere counter-gaze of the celibate yogini. The 'feminine' women respond on a spectrum between worldly and spiritual desire. The unmarried girl wearing a peaked cap looks on at the men with longing. Of the two older women, one turns towards the princes somewhat impassively while the other casts a glance at them and then turns away from sensuality, looking mysteriously at the painting's beholder. Another woman, a mother, is unconcerned with romantic love and looks contentedly at her baby who is perhaps the blessing of a yogini and who looks out onto the spectator, roping the latter's desire into the composition. There are no innocent gazes here. The yogini's magisterial presence vexes earlier themes of lovers and beloveds; it complicates and simplifies the desires of urbane women.


Figure 3.16

In one painting, a beautiful urban woman wanders bereft and vulnerable into the countryside to seek the blessings of an ashen-coloured yogini with a *veena* who evokes *ragini* imagery. The landscape is European, underscoring the socially non-normative yogini's foreignness (Fig. 3.16). A ubiquitous composition in this period depicts a young princess and her entourage travelling great distances to seek out a yogini. Leaning against a tree, with bowed head, the princess listens rapt to the music that the yogini plays, and deer draw near. The yogini and her devotee interchangeably embody *Todi Ragini* and the former grants *darshan* across the potent riverine space between the two women (Fig. 3.17).


Figure 3.17

The ancient relationship between Muslim kings and *nath* yoginis still prevailed and Mughal emperors, in the final days of the empire, commissioned flower processions at yogini temples. However, as seen here, painting was pre-occupied in evincing the tension between different practices of femininity. Women prayed to yoginis for resolving quotidian concerns: for the health of a child, for warding off troublesome enemies or alleviating financial difficulties plaguing their households. The feminine as embodied by these women was considered to be superstitious and vernacular; nonetheless, it upheld imperial social order.

Several forms of yoginis' autonomy are crystallised in 18th-century-CE Lucknow painting. Yoginis often inspired fear in those to whom they granted


Figure 3.18

darshan. As immortal beings, they were conceived of as hungry for flesh, and were worshipped with blood and liquor. They were experienced as witches who raped men in their sleep and left them sexually spent. Artists drew on these forbidding characteristics of yoginis in their work and set these figures in scenes of eerie darkness lit by flickering flames (Fig. 3.18). Due to their 'contaminating' desires, yoginis were worshipped in remote places that were, nonetheless, not sinister; yoginis tamed wild beasts and made the dark safe for devotees who earned their protection.


Figure 3.19

Dr. Jaya Kanoria writes, "A pair of *nim qalam* paintings in an important Mughal album place King Solomon, emblematic of justice, and Majnun, emblematic of passion, in the charged spot at the centre of the upper third of the folio (Fig. 3.19). Justice and passion are two guises in which the presence of the divine manifests. Another *nim qalam* painting places a Golconda yogini playing her *vina* to an animal court in the same magical spot or *bindu* which holds sacred power in works across the Mughal world (Fig. 3.20)."[18] Music is another manifestation of divine presence. These paintings worked as a triad on the imagination of 18th-century-CE Mughal artists. They are executed in dark, spare lines and muted shades to emphasise the esoteric nature of the compositions. In another Mughal painting, Krishna occupies the centre of authority, seated under Majnun's tree. The buffaloes who are drawn to his music evoke parallels with the blackbuck in the yogini painting. He does not command a wild *darbar* and is, instead, surrounded by enraptured *gopis* (Fig. 3.21, right).


Figure 3.20

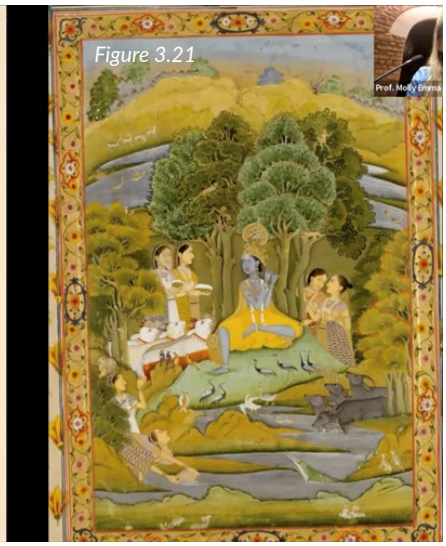


Figure 3.21

A painting commissioned for a Lucknow album by the Swiss mercenary Antoine Pollier is labelled in *Nastaliq* as 'Hindu *Zenana Majlis*' (Fig. 3.22). Rejecting the austere palette of the paintings described above, it grants the central position of authority to a yogini dressed in 'Indian' orange, flat-chested, seated under Majnun's tree, and playing Krishna's flute – a masculine instrument – with delicate hennaed fingers. This yogini evokes *Ragamala* iconography. She holds a *darbar* of animals – Krishna's peacock, partridges, deer, and blackbuck – as well as of *sahelis* from the *zenana*. The scene is a courtly performance; however, the yogini is imbued with iconic presence. The woman on the lower far-right in the arms of her Hindu *saheli* wears long curls down her cheek in the manner of a Muslim courtesan. These embracing women sport masculine faces compared to the *gopi*-like femininity of the other women standing and seated around the yogini. The only other yogini painting that depicts a cluster of golden partridges on the grass is that of the Bijapur yogini which was reframed for an album commissioned by Sultan Quli Qutb Shah and this album is thought to have reached Lucknow in the 18th century CE. The range of evocations, repetitions, and substitutions performed by this single painting leave the beholder with an overwhelming sense of bewilderment.


Figure 3.22

As such, yoginis occupied a liminal existence in 18th-century-CE Lucknow which boasted of a Ganga-Yamuna *tehzeeb*. Their music melted away differences in culture and gender with all-embracing compassion; living in the interstices of orthodox praxis they sanctified, to iterate,

freedom from normative social constraints.

Figure 3.23

The late-Mughal Lucknow of this period was itself caught in a liminal political reality. A painting commissioned for the same album as the 'Hindu *Zenana Majlis*' portrays Antoine Polier, an East India Company officer and engineer in service to Nawab Asif ud Daulah, interacting with his fellow expatriates (Fig. 3.23). Polier was a member of the Asiatic Society and literate in Persian and Urdu. He collected Mughal paintings and commissioned works by Mughal artists such as Mihr Chand. This painting is composed by the German-British artist Johann Zoffany and he portrays himself in it as painting ascetics on a canvas in British Academic style. "Zoffany stares straight out at [the beholder] with an inscrutable gaze. A smaller face with equally black inscrutable eyes looks out from behind and beside him, his pale-skinned double and guise; she is a yogini" and he looks at the world through her gaze. To the Indian imagination of that time both were non-normative foreigners.

The intensity of this aesthetic moment was nourished by a political milieu in which the lines of difference between European and Southasian identities were not yet articulated precisely; hierarchies were tensely fluid. It is bewildering, from our vantage point, to witness this phenomenon of gender play in early colonial painting and to realise that the British Raj, whose legacy of gender practices pervades postcolonial India in pernicious ways was, then, still an unimaginable reality.

Conclusion: Eschewing Mimesis in Art and Life

As such, a strand of Western Romantic aesthetic theory formulated in the late 19th century CE by Oscar Wilde to subvert the mode of realism in the arts prevalent then is wistful for, among other artistic developments, the imaginative praxis of Eastern traditions which is eulogised, in an unnuanced Orientalist vein, for its "frank rejection of imitation"[18] and "love of artistic convention"[19].

The very imaginative faculty is politicised as belonging to a feminine temperament in contradistinction to the hard-edged 'masculinity' of Anglo-Saxon artistic conventions that insisted on mirroring and edifying life. Wilde's own literary revival of the fairy-tale genre infused with elements of the burlesque was an act of 'feminising' his cultural context[20].

According to Wilde too, the aesthetic realm claims a more efficacious ontic status than everyday reality and impinges upon it to make and unmake worlds in the former's own image. However, for him, depersonalised aesthetic pleasure is possible ideally by elimination of the local and the vernacular, as well as contemporary subject-matter that piques the beholder's morality. Moreover, it is imperative to Wilde's non-theistic reactionary politics that life be an 'unfinished copy' of art's archetypes; life must necessarily be a lower-order *imitation* of art so that the Platonic ideal is properly inverted.

In all, the aesthetic milieu described in this paper was a repository of intense experiences and energies that could not be accessed fully through lived reality and had real consequences for the texture of that reality. The social world also pervaded the artistic realm in an intensified manner and the *bhava* of many of the works discussed above was evoked by their liminal existence between metaphor and contemporary socio-political attitudes as well as by their local, vernacular nature, in a manner that eschewed concerns with didacticism.

Moving beyond aesthetic theory, for the worlds discussed above art did not leave life wanting despite the former's unique intensity; imperial order demanded that each be approached on its own terms even as both 'brought each other into being'. Both were governed by a politics of divine truth. In several socio-aesthetic contexts here, life was conceived of in an elevated manner not as art's 'imitation' but its 'incarnation', and both realms merged with and separated from each other through generative negotiation that evinces not simple truth but complex beauty.

All quotations without attendant footnotes refer to excerpts from Prof. Molly Aitken's three-day lecture series '*Surface, Depth, Bewilderment: Propositions for Thinking About Feminine Beauty in the Paintings of Mughal India*'

dated January 9th, 10th, and 11th, 2023 at Jnanapravaha Mumbai.

[1]Dr. Jaya Kanoria, *Surface, Depth, Bewilderment: Propositions for Thinking About Feminine Beauty in the Paintings of Mughal India* (Mumbai: JPM Quarterly, April–June 2023), p. 9.
[2] B. N. Goswamy, "A Layered World" in *The Spirit of Indian Painting: Close Encounters with 101 Great Works 1100–1900* (London: Penguin Allen Lane, 2014), p. 32.
[3] David Shulman, "Poetics 2: Illumination" in *More Than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 82.
[4] Ibid., p. 104.
[5] Ibid., p. 87.
[6] Ibid., p. 71.
[7] Dr. Jaya Kanoria, *Surface, Depth, Bewilderment: Propositions for Thinking About Feminine Beauty in the Paintings of Mughal India* (Mumbai: JPM Quarterly, April–June 2023), pp. 13–14.
[8] David Shulman, "Early Modern Bhavana" in *More Than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 147.
[9] Ibid., p. 148.
[10] Ibid., p. 149.
[11] Molly Emma Aitken, "Structures of Desire" in *The Intelligence of Tradition in Rajput Court Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 38.
[12] Ibid., p. 12.
[13] Ibid., p. 42.
[14] Ibid., p. 54.
[15] Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Kingdom, Household, Body" in *At the Edges of Empire: Essays in the Social and Intellectual History of India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2014), pp. 472–473.
[16] Dr. Jaya Kanoria, *Surface, Depth, Bewilderment: Propositions for Thinking About Feminine Beauty in the Paintings of Mughal India* (Mumbai: JPM Quarterly, April–June 2023), p. 12.
[17] Ruby Lal, "Settled, sacred, and "incarcerated": the imperial *haram*" in *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World: Historicising the Haram* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2005), p. 207.
[18] Dr. Jaya Kanoria, *Surface, Depth, Bewilderment: Propositions for Thinking About Feminine Beauty in the Paintings of Mughal India* (Mumbai: JPM Quarterly, April–June 2023), p. 15.
[19] Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying" in *The Decay of Lying and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010), p. 17.
[20] For a detailed, nuanced explication of Wilde's nationalistic exhortation for the Romantic 'turn' in aesthetics refer to the section titled "The Reaction Against Realism" in John Sloan, *Oscar Wilde: Authors in Context* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2009), pp. 75–87.

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India in Fashion Exhibition, NMACC, Mumbai, Photo: Adira Thekkuveettil

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