

Bichitr 'Shah Jahan receives his sons 1628' 1630



Artist: Bichitr - signed In Persian on image

Date: 1630 (calligrapher finished the text c.1656-57)

Medium: opaque watercolour and gold on paper

Size: single page miniature from right hand page of book 58.6 x36.8cm

Patron: Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan (ruled 1627-1658)

Source: an illustration from the Padshahnama (Book of Emperors)

Style: Mughal

Location: Royal Collection Windsor Castle

ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter:

Mughal painting is primarily an art of illustration - of poetry, people, events, flora and fauna - and most Mughal paintings were originally intended for inclusion in books, or to be bound in albums. This example by Bichitr is a narrative illustration from the Mughal manuscript known as The Padshahnama (Book of Emperors) 1656-57, a history of the reign of Emperor Shah-Jahan. It commemorates a historical event, namely the accession ceremony of Shah Jahan when he formally became the Emperor and took the title Shah Jahan ('King of the World').

The Royal Collection Trust describes it:

“Shah-Jahan succeeded to the throne on the death of his father the Emperor Jahangir, in November 1627. This painting shows one of the key elements of the accession ceremonies in the following year. It is the first illustration in the Padshahnama narrative to show Shah-Jahan as Emperor. The event recorded is the arrival at the fort in Agra on 8 March 1628 of the Emperor's four sons with their maternal grandfather Asaf Khan, who now held the post of Wakil or Prime Minister. The eldest son, Prince Dara-Shikoh, kneels before his father; behind him are Prince Shah-Shuja and Prince Awrangzeb (Shah-Jahan's successor). The youngest son, Prince Muradbakhsh stands behind his father. Many of the nobles in attendance were related to Asaf Khan - a feat achieved by careful calculation and at times intrigue, which had the result that access to the Emperor was overseen by members of his own family. For example, the man in brown holding the paper in the bottom third of the picture, the great commander A'zam Khan is Asaf Khan's brother and the man in a black and white robe, Ja'far Khan, was both nephew and son-in-law to Asaf Khan. The text records how: 'Hearing the good news of the arrival of the princes, Her Majesty Mahd-i-Ulya [Mumtaz Mahal] set out by imperial command...to receive them...The entire day was spent by the parents admiring the beauty of their grandsons. The next day...all the nobles and grandees went out by royal command to greet the princes and escort them and Yaminuddawla [Asaf Khan] to court. When the jharoka...was illuminated by the rays of the Emperor's enthronement, the princes and Yaminuddawla [Asaf Khan] were allowed to pay homage.' ...

The eye is immediately drawn to the Emperor and below him to the surface of a large globe, on which two lions and a lamb are seated. These images are symbolic of peace and harmony - elements we are encouraged to believe would be the hallmark of the reign.”¹

Emily Hannam explains the allegorical meaning: *“on either side are two mullahs, two Muslim clerics. They represent religious authority. Directly between them is a gold chain with bells. This represents the chain of justice. This was a real chain that hung from Agra Fort down to the river. Anyone from across the whole Mughal Empire could come and ring the bells on this train to attract the emperor's attention. This symbolises Shah Jahan's commitment to justice.”*² The mullah will read the Friday sermon in the emperor's name for the first time from the golden platform shown in the centre. This latest information will then be spread around the Mughal empire.

The elder sons each kiss the ground in front of the emperor and present a tribute of a golden coin before Shah-Jahan kisses their foreheads. They had been held hostage by Shah-Jahan's father Jahangir to prevent Shah-Jahan from rebelling, and it is the first time he has seen them for seven years!

This “formalised durbar-scene-cum-group-portrait, with the emperor seated in the Diwan-i-Am” first appeared in the illustrations of histories of Sha-Jahan's grandfather's and father's reigns (the Akbarnama and Jahangirnama)³.

¹ <https://www.rct.uk/shah-jahans-accession>

² <http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-objects-bichitr-and-ramdas-shah-jahan-receives-his-three-eldest-sons-and-asaf>

³ Harle, J.C. (1986) *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent* p. 378

Public court ceremonies such as these were known as durbars, and the emperor always sat in this raised balcony at the far end of the open airy public audience hall in the centre of the Fort at Agra.

It was made of carved white marble with gilded decoration on the capitals and corbels, walls painted with designs of large flowering plants, and similar designs on the textile hangings. Highly decorated carpets are also visible in the foreground and on the balcony. The architectural structure reinforces the hierarchy of court culture, with those in the foreground in front of the gold railing having the least status as they are furthest from the Padshah (Emperor). All those present wear court dress: long gowns with decorated sashes, turbans and often earrings despite including Rajputs, Afghans and other ethnicities. There are no women as they were kept apart from public life at this period (of course they were very involved behind the scenes!).

Shah Jahan is noticeable for his extra jewellery, pearl necklace and feathers in his turban as well as the gold halo around his head which represents divine light transmitted directly from God. Above his head is an awning - the shamiana, where the huma bird (a Persian bird of paradise) flies hence illustrating the legend indicating he will be a great king. This image is therefore carefully constructed propaganda. It is interesting to note in relation to European portraiture of the time (parallel to Rembrandt's group portraits) that Shah Jahan is shown torso only and in profile rather than frontal and full length. He appears more remote, like a portrait bust on a coin.

To examine the tiny details of the image go to: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/padshahnama-plate-10-shah-jahan-receives-his-three-eldest-sons-and-asaf-khan-during-his-accession-ceremonies-8-march-1628-bichitr/>

Formal elements:

Mughal painting of the seventeenth century is realistic with a focus on recognisable portraits and tiny details from the natural world. The strict hierarchy of court culture is repeated in the symmetry and balance that Bichitr has brought to the composition. The architectural elements provide strong verticals and horizontals to frame the various groups - family at the top, nobles and generals in centre; and the series of profile portraits mirror each other in an oval, while the figures are also positioned to form a pyramid with the Padshah at the apex. Western traditions of mathematical perspective are not used systematically because Mughal artists did not aim for illusionism but idealism. The edges of the golden platform nevertheless recede, and the overlapping figures suggest space. However, the scale of the figures is not entirely consistent. The emperor's young sons are appropriately smaller in scale, yet distant figures are the same scale as those in the foreground. Strong colours, especially reds and golds dominate, with a lot of interest in pattern, from dramatic stripes to subtle florals. There are no visible light sources or cast shadows, yet very subtle tonal modelling ensures we read every portrait as a realistic individual.

CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

The Mughal dynasty (1526-1858) established by Babur was among the richest and longest ruling in India. The Mughals were Muslims from central Asia and Persian was their court language. The Mughal dynasty claimed ethnic descent from the Mongols ("Mughal" is from the Arabized transliteration of "Moghol," or Mongol).

The Mughal emperors were among India's greatest patrons of art, responsible for some of the country's most spectacular buildings, and Mughal court culture reached its peak under the fifth ruler, Shah Jahan.



He built the white marble buildings of the forts in Agra, Delhi and Lahore, and the famous mausoleum - the Taj Mahal, built in memory of his third wife. Mughal architecture has a distinctive Indo-Islamic architectural style. Many of his buildings were by Persian architects, so it is a symmetrical and decorative amalgam of Persian, Turkish, and Indian architecture. The Mughals were also renowned for creating exquisite gardens. This manuscript with 42 illustrations was commissioned by the fifth Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan as propaganda, “as a celebration of his reign and his dynasty” (Hannam)⁴. Written by the court historian Abd al-Hamid of Lahore, the objective of the text was to proclaim the political and ideological legitimacy of the Emperor’s rule.

The relationship of artist to Emperor is made explicit in the image as there is a faint Persian inscription (written from right to left) which reads “work of the most insignificant slave Bichitr”. It is located vertically beneath the feet of the Shah above the lamb and should be read as a sign of his humility rather than his literal social position. The emperor closely supervised his artists with direct instructions on form and content, and appreciated their skills.



DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

This miniature is painted with tiny brushes, made with hair from the tails of young squirrels, on paper in what we would now call watercolour. Ground organic mineral

⁴ <http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-objects-bichitr-and-ramdas-shah-jahan-receives-his-three-eldest-sons-and-asaf>

and metallic pigments were mixed with a binding agent of gum Arabic. Bichitr would have sat on the ground with a board and handmade paper on his knee. First, he would make a rough sketch in charcoal, then the final paper was prepared. He would burnish the paper with a piece of agate until it had an enamel-like surface, then make charcoal underdrawings, before he began with strong permanent black outline of gum Arabic mixed with soot. The whole drawing is covered with a thin layer of white to allow underdrawings to show through. The colour is built up with layers and layers of thin pigment. Some areas are matt, and some metallic areas have been burnished to appear shiny. The gold is applied at the end, the largest area of gilding is the gold platform in the centre which has also been incised with a needle to create shape and form. Some details are so tiny they are hard to see with the naked eye. Finally, Bichitr also burnished the back of the paper to bind all the pigments together for durability.

WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

This imperial manuscript is unique and would have been regarded as very precious. Few people outside the immediate family would have had access to it. It would have been kept within the family for posterity as a commemorative record of the events of the Shah's reign for dynastic purposes. Unillustrated written versions of the book were given as gifts to nobles.

In the early eighteenth century the Mughal Empire began to break apart and from the mid eighteenth century the British East India Company dominated large parts of India. As a result of this colonial history, the book found its way to Britain. After the Mughal imperial libraries were looted and much of their contents sold off, the Padshahnama was purchased by the Nawab (ruler) of Lucknow because it represented the epitome of Mughal history and culture of the previous century - the equivalent of an old master painting. It was presented as a gift to Lord Teignmouth, Governor General of India: 'This is the most splendid Persian manuscript I ever saw. Many of the faces are very well painted and some of them are portraits. The first is the portrait of Timur or Tamerlane, and the second that of Shahjehan. This was the book which was shown to me at Lucknow, and I was there informed that the deceased Nabob Asophuddoulah purchased it for 12,000 rupees, or about £1550.'⁵ He refused it but suggested it would make an appropriate gift for the British king. It was presented to King George III c. 1797.

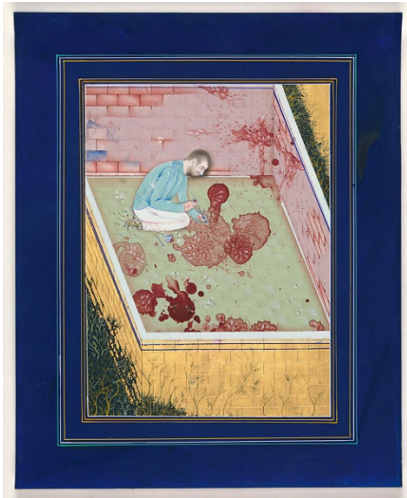
Today, contemporary artists in South Asia, Britain and the USA re-interpret Mughal imagery as a means of exploring issues of empire, history and culture e.g. Imran Qureshi and Saira Wasim from Lahore, Pakistani-American Shahzia Sikander, and the British Sikh Singh Twins.

Bibliography:

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Hannam, Emily Open Arts Objects film: <http://www.openartsarchive.org/resource/open-arts-objects-bichitr-and-ramdas-shah-jahan-receives-his-three-eldest-sons-and-asaf>

⁵ <https://www.rct.uk/shah-jahans-accession>

Google Arts & Culture website: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/padshahnama-plate-10-shah-jahan-receives-his-three-eldest-sons-and-asaf-khan-during-his-accession-ceremonies-8-march-1628-bichitr/>
<https://smarthistory.org/asia/south-asia/mughal-empire/>
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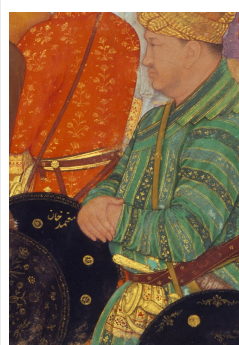
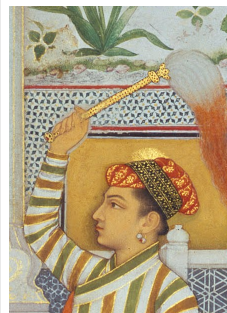


Imran Qureshi (b. 1972) *Opening Word of this New Scripture* 2013
 Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969) *Many Faces or The Resurgence of Islam*, 1997-1999



Singh Twins - Rabindra and Amrit (b.1966) *Daddy in the Sitting Room III*
 Saira Wasim (b. 1975) *Friendship after 11 September*

Identify the details from the image



How is Shah Jahan's ethnic identity as a Muslim Mughal ruler represented?	What is the significance of the location of the durbar for the meaning of the group portrait?
How does Shah Jahan's portrait as the most significant individual in the scene differ from European traditions of portraiture?	How important are the details of genre/ everyday life for the painting?