



REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)

UGC APPROVED JOURNAL NO. 48514

VOLUME - 8 | ISSUE - 9 | JUNE - 2019



REPRESENTATION OF WESTERN SYMBOLISM IN THE PAINTINGS OF JAHANGIR

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ABSTRACT:

Mirza Nur-ud-din Beig Mohammad Khan Salim or the self-styled world-seizer, Jahangir was an intrepid ruler who was proud of his judgment and leadership. He inherited a relatively consolidated empire and retained much of his father's policy of tolerance and compassion; of justice and impartiality directed towards his subjects, in order to sustain the empire. Jahangir's political disposition, his military feats however is not the intent of the paper. The paper rather attempts to analyze the interesting manifestation of his personality traits vis-à-vis the royal atelier of painting under him. Much of the works that are available on Jahangir although replete with his achievements as a ruler, the vast information of history on the emperor, which could otherwise be reconstructed from the art of painting, is still wanting and therefore an attempt is made here to fill a small gap towards that goal. For the purpose of the paper, the primary sources on Jahangir, his autobiography, has been extensively dealt with. The numerous works on painting, both on European tradition as well as Mughal, have been referred. Paintings commissioned under Jahangir and reproduced in books, the original extant paintings in museums across the globe and reproduced in books etc. have been broadly used.



KEYWORDS: Jahangir, Painting, Symbolism, Ideology, Naturalism, Personality, European traditions.

INTRODUCTION

Mirza Nur-ud-din Beig Mohammad Khan Salim or the self-styled 'World-Seizer', Jahangir was an intrepid ruler who was proud of his judgment and leadership. He inherited a relatively consolidated empire and retained much of his father's policy of tolerance and compassion; of justice and impartiality directed towards his subjects, in order to sustain the empire. Jahangir's political disposition, his military

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here to fill the gap.

In the field of painting, contrary to the ancestral principle of regarding this art form as "one of the privileges of rulership,"¹ which expresses the lofty ideals of the rulers, Jahangir considered painting rather as a source of inspiration and means for aesthetic fulfillment. While this was true, yet Jahangir's notion of divine intervention was well manifested in his commissions, whether as a means of deliberate political obligation or as an

inspiration. The resultant effect was that Mughal painting was far removed from the restraints and permeated a more spatial and emancipated character representations. "The pictures share not only a common taste for exquisite surface effects and minute detail, but also a common approach to space, composition, drawing and shading."²

While the number of works commissioned by Jahangir was much less compared to the huge repertoire of his father, the quality of work of the son was far superior to his father. Painting reached its zenith under the brilliant guardianship of Jahangir and this period is considered as the golden age of Mughal painting for its entire inclusive disposition. His passion for natural art and intense spiritualism were the binding forces behind new creations in both subjects as well as technique. Even as birds, animals and flowers of a large variety remained a constant theme, "realistic landscape painting in the open air made its first appearance in Indian art,"³ under Jahangir's tutelage. The meticulous rendering of these objects suggest intense intellectual consideration.

European influence in Akbari painting was limited to the external idiomatic expressions of art, discernible in the distant perspective, the garments, the three-dimensional view and the restraint outlook etc. The mythical intensity however, was not transmitted yet on a large scale. The few instances of allegorical representations evident towards the end of his reign were mostly copies of western originals, without much insight on allegory. In the succeeding regime however, the major element in European traditions of painting that was especially appealing to Emperor Jahangir was the allegorical representations. Western symbolism in painting presented the most profound impact and triggered the beginning of using art as a medium for expressing their ideals more effectively. In fact, western contacts enlightened the School of Jahangiri painting, "in both its doctrinal and its purely figurative aspects."⁴

Jahangir's interest in western paintings evidently started early while he was a prince and deepened along time. There are several contemporary references that attest Jahangir's predilection for western paintings over Persian. Thus he had in his possession various pictures, such as that of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, St. John the Baptist, St. Anthony, St. Paul, St. Gregory, St. Anne, St. Ambrose and St. Susannah etc. In 1607, the Jesuit father, Father Jerome Xavier presented him an "illustrated copy of the Persian version of the Acts of the Apostles, (**Dastan i-Ahwal i-Hawariyan**)."⁵ Apart from the religious pictures, Jahangir also had in his possession western paintings on secular subjects. These were among the gifts presented by the western traders that reached the Mughal court in increasing numbers by that time. These pictures found places in his **muraqqas** (albums) and as frescoes that adorned his palace walls. Sir Thomas Roe, the English Ambassador affirmed Jahangir's growing penchant for western art as he described the walls of the Daulat Bagh (Garden of Splendour) that the emperor constructed on the Ana Sagar Lake, "rooms which were painted with Antique, and in some Panes Copies of the French kings and other Christian Princes."⁶ Among his collections were included portraits of "the King of England, the Queene, my Lady Elizabeth, the Countesse(S) of Sommersett and Salisbury, and of a citizens wife of London;"⁷ "another of Sir Thomas Smyth, Governor of the East India Company."⁸ The Mughal artists drew inspirations from these excellent works and transformed them into a Mughal theme.

Many of these paintings were either directly copied or parts of it incorporated in the paintings. Illustrations of foreign subjects thus expanded from religious figures during Akbar's reign to portraits of kings and nobles under Jahangir. The inspiration was strong mainly of the biblical symbolic representations brought by the Jesuits missionaries. These religious depictions had a profound impact on the figurative delineation of Mughal painting during Jahangir's reign, as it seems to have concurred with his growing spiritualism. When comparing some illustrations of Jahangiri School, striking resemblance of symbolic depictions were traced in the title pages of the Polyglot Bible. The painting of **Jahangir Embracing Shah Abbas** dated 1618 attributed to Abul Hassan



and Jahangir Standing on a Globe and Shooting at the Head of His Enemy Malik Amber



dated 1620, now at the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin by the same artist have the peaceful harboring of the lion with the sheep and sometimes the goat on the globe, affected by the virtuous rule of the just emperor. Besides the regular use of globes symbolizing the universe; and animals, an intense connection seems to run parallel between the Chester Beatty painting referred above and the **Pietas Regia** by Pieter van der Borcht, on the second title page of the Plantyn's Bible, volume 1. In the words of Ebba Koch, the Pietas Regia in "its content and meaning were translated into the pictorial language of the Mughals."⁹ Thus is seen, the centrally positioned figures of pious and righteous rulers; the allotment of detrimental and vicious objects indicating malevolence on the left side; and on the right, of prolific and venerable attributes. The divine acceptance of their pious rule was also connoted by the majestic insignias, such as the laurel wreath, sword and arrows carried by the **putt** through the clouds in both the pictures. In yet another picture, these elements were beautifully arrayed and every symbolic meaning was given their due significance. This is the **Allegorical portrait of Jahangir as the Just Ruler triumphing over Poverty** dated 1625 (10) and indicated Abul Hasan's superb renditions of such style.



Here, Jahangir is seen embodied as the sun and exterminating the old scrawny figure in the darkness symbolizing poverty, by shooting arrows at it and the **putti** acknowledging the divine rule of the emperor, providing arrows and bearing him the regal crown. Another implication of justice is the depiction of the long chain of bells suspended from above the cloud and held by another **putto**, gesturing divine sanction of the emperor's rule. There is continuity of the globe from the **Pietas Regia** and of the peaceful sheltering of the lion and sheep under his harmonious rule. The miniature of **Meeting of Jahangir with Shah Abbas** dated 1620 also symbolizes the elimination of hostility under the righteous rule, and triumph of virtue and integrity. Therefore, symbolic features of the triumphant rule of Jahangir over Shah Abbas of Persia and the submission of the Persian Shah implied by the subdued facial expression as also by the white dove that symbolizes peace were translated into the picture. The **putti** above similarly represented the divine acceptance, holding an emblem of recognition. With the growing intensity of the myth surrounding the Mughal rulers especially Jahangir, of the supreme power vested on them by divine virtue, there was a parallel increase in the production of symbolic representations to augment that image. In such productions, the stimulation from European images tremendously promoted Jahangir's goal. Thus, a characteristic Mughal hybrid expressing visually Jahangir's literary concepts of rulership by means of composition techniques derived from European allegories became a successful apparatus. ¹¹In these demonstrations, the **putto** angel developed into a relatively significant feature and this device was an innovation at the Jahangiri studio. Furthermore, Ebba Koch related Luschey Schmeisser's interpretation of "winged beings in connection with Muslim rulers as symbols of victory and power going back to the victories of classical times. She viewed them further as an expression of rulership in search of the blessing of the angels and as winged beings who protect and serve the ruler."¹² This clearly explains Jahangir's indulgence with the western allegoric images and the necessity of employing angels in most of his miniatures and even in the frescoes on his palace walls in conformity with the western tradition and style.

The allegorical impact was also felt tremendously on the portraits, which developed significantly under Jahangir and extended until the final phase of the Mughal dynasty. The exalted spirit of the emperor was best manifested in the portraits with the crowning glory symbolized by the use of the round golden halo around the emperor's head.

Several references of the origin of the halo in Persia, in the form of the flame halo are available. "As a circular disk, it is first seen in the Graeco-Buddhist sculpture of the north-western frontier of India, anciently known as Gandhara, about the beginning of the Christian era."¹³ With the dispersal of the Buddhist faith throughout Asia and beyond, this symbol too followed different expressions in different routes of culture and subsequently entered the European scene. It is this variety of the European nimbus that saw its entry in the Mughal period, predominantly during the reign of Jahangir, signifying the divine status of the ruler.

These allegorical representations especially adapted during Jahangir's time and after, to legitimize their prodigious status were mostly after the Italian Mannerist technique, those that "rise in Gothic steepness and clearly work out the medieval tendencies in the art of Michelangelo."¹⁴ Mannerism in Italy was a result of a profound dedication to art, which developed in the middle ages. It was a veneration for their faith and served as "an expression of an essentially Christian civilization; its function of a lofty and dedicated religious purpose."¹⁵ While the goal was purely religious for the Italian Mannerists, the Mughal rulers used the same vehicle for a multipurpose end – religious, artistic as well as political.

Prior to Jahangir's period such allegorical representations were mostly adaptations from original works, done more as an implementation of the technique and does not quite indicate the underlying symbolic connotation. Apart from importing western symbolic images in the Mughal illustrations, reproduction of European originals continued during Jahangir's period and well into later Mughal period. Of the various European original works, an excellent illustration is that of **The Martyrdom of Saint Ceilia**¹⁶ painted by Nini, a court painter of Jahangiri School around the early years of seventeenth century. This work was copied from among the Italian originals brought by the Jesuit missionaries.

Among the original western prints and engravings, the most extensively copied picture was the Virgin and Child. Although with variations in the productions, the theme had been used in several illustrations throughout the Mughal School. Jahangiri varieties are miniatures like, **A mother and child in landscape** dated early seventeenth century and signed Raqamahu Mirza Muhammad al-Hasaniat the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, **The Virgin and Child with a white cat** dated 1615 at the Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, **The Madonna and Child** of the Jahangiri school signed Chulam-I Shah Salim at the British Museum, London, which was an inspired work from an original engraving by Bernaert van Orley (1492-1542) and also **The Virgin and Child with Anna the Prophetess** dated 1610 from the Johnson album 14 No. 4 where the child Christ is seen climbing and trying to reach Mary and Anna seen gesturing a man sitting besides the Virgin and an attendant waiting behind him holding a gun.

Among the new elements that were incorporated in Mughal painting with the introduction of western art, inclusion of Christian saints as well as of prominent Christian figures and angels in the panel pictures that adorned the walls of the pavilion behind the throne became a well practiced tendency among the Mughal artists and continued well into the Mughal School. Such instances saw its beginning towards the end of Akbar's reign as part of a decorative aspect and continued regularly thereafter. These were evidenced in the miniature of **Nur Jahan feasting Jahangir and Prince Khurram** from an album page of Jahangir. There were images of the Christ and the Virgin in the upper panel of the pavilion wall. A miniature from the **Padshahnama** of the Royal Library, Windsor Castle, **Jahangir presents Prince Khurram with a turban ornament** in the Diwan-i 'Amm of Mandu in late 1617, attributed to Prayag dated 1640 showed the panel with pictures of Christian religious figures.

The enclosure of Christian subjects was also found in the album pages of Jahangir and especially in the border illumination, of "European subjects, taken from the Flemish and German prints which so appealed to Jahangir."¹⁸ This was evident in a miniature of the opening phrases of the **Akbarnama**,¹⁹ the border of which was decorated with pictures of saints and angels. This was among the works, which were enclosed within new borders during the initial years of Jahangir.

That there were copious prints, engravings and paintings available in the Mughal court is attested by various contemporary accounts. Another fact was that there were also some references that speak of the presence of European artists themselves at the Mughal court in the late sixteenth and beginning of seventeenth century. The Jesuit accounts referred to a Portuguese painter,²⁰ who copied a picture of the Virgin Mary. Apart from the Portuguese' presence, Sir Thomas Roe mentioned at least two painters at Jahangir's court; Robert Hewes and another "painter whom the Mogol would have to take his pictures; and because hee could not speake the language, Master Steele (who could speake the language of the court, which is Persian) was admitted (a thing not permitted to men) into the Mogols lodgings, where he did sit for the said limner."²¹ The English influence was mainly derived from these painters and from the prints and engravings that the Ambassador brought as presents. The famous English miniaturists, Isaac Oliver's work, which was gifted to the emperor served as a source for several copies, one of which was even offered to Sir Thomas Roe himself, as he reiterated in his letters, of the emperor's presents, "yow shall choose any of these coppies to showe in England wee are not unskillfull as yow esteeme us. Soe hee pressed mee to choose one, which I did."²²

Jahangir was deeply fascinated by the variety of flowers and especially of those varieties he saw in Kashmir during his sojourn at the place. He often wrote beautiful verses in admiration of these flowers. Here is where we see the other category of western influence – in the delineation of floras and faunas and in landscape – naturalism, which is the singular characteristic of Mughal School.

Jahangir delegated Mansur, his best painter on animals, the task of painting likenesses of variety of flowers and stated, "those that Nadir al asri Ustad Mansur has painted are more than 100."²³ Of the extant pictures on floral painting, the best is that of **Red Tulips**



in the Habiganj Library, Aligarh, India dated 1620. Robert Skelton confirmed this variety of tulip “is not native to Kashmir but could easily have been introduced there at that date.”²⁴ The depiction of butterfly fluttering above the flowers “is a cliché in certain of the European herbals.”²⁵ The possible hypothesis, if the flower is not grown in Kashmir, is that western prints on floras and faunas had also reached the Mughal court with the increased influx of Europeans by that time.

Jahangir’s curiosity for rare and strange birds and animals were best exemplified by the series of paintings of the different species of the faunas by his master painters, Mansur and Manohar. The **Tuzuk-i Jahangiri** recounted the emperor’s possession of “some animals that were very strange and wonderful,”²⁶ which arrived from the port of Goa. Among these was a **turkey-cock**²⁷



painted by Ustad Mansur in 1612. This picture is yet another proof of Jahangir’s interest in natural history and also the fact that most of its renderings were done from life, convinced his ambition for realistic results in painting. This called for acute observation from the artists, of the subjects to be painted, to obtain a precise idea of its mass and volume. Such precision is also seen in another miniature, **Himalayan Makhur** painted by Inayat dated 1607, in the Wantage Album at Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

CONCLUSION:

Jahangir’s preference for naturalistic representation and of cool palette averted the Persian ornamented outlook in painting and greatly fancied the western flavor. Since the paintings comprised mainly depictions of natural sciences, of the floras and faunas, human portraits, there was more scope for inspirations from the European realistic representations than had been during Akbar’s period. Moreover, the scientific estimation, whether in architectural representation or the masterly use of perspective in landscape seen in European paintings, harmonized well with Jahangir’s selection of subjects. Added to these were the figurative idioms of the west, which lent the best means for the portrayal of Mughal ruler’s ideologies. The inspirations from the western figurative representations

found in the prints and engravings brought by the Jesuits and the traders crystallized the growing spiritualism of Emperor Jahangir. The motifs such as the globe, the laurel wreath, the golden halo and the angels served as symbols for justice as well as for power and as such, these were increasingly transported into the paintings of Jahangir and continued successfully into the later period.

Jahangir's supervision in painting followed a more subtle expression; a figurative disguise was mainly used to imply the emperor's lofty spirit. A sharp contrast was seen in the often flamboyant and voluble pictures of Akbar and in Jahangir's restrained productions. The commissions also shifted from the huge undertakings of book illustrations to individual study of men, animals and birds. This also greatly reduced the requirements of flashy tones in the pictures. The landscape paintings with the western characteristic of spaciousness, receding horizon, soft hues and the architectural designs of the buildings reminiscent of European, mostly Italian or Swiss township, were well formulated and better delivered than the Akbari adaptations. By the end of his reign, a completely new dimension was distinct in the portraits especially of the emperor himself, an awe-inspiring phase of supernatural depictions. The portraits depicted a mystical emperor with a halo formed around his head or other "scenes of apotheosis."²⁸ There are speculations whether or not such transcendence was a result of heavy intoxication from opium and alcohol addiction. It could also perhaps account for Jahangir's closeness with the saints and dervishes that resulted in such revelation as reflected in the picture.

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