

Mughal Miniature Paintings' Decorative Elements: An Analysis Of Border Compositions

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Abstract: *Fauna have always been important to the visual narrative and ornamental agenda of Mughal miniature painting, serving as both elaborate decorative components and symbolic and narrative devices. With a primary focus on pieces credited to well-known court artists like Mansur, Govardhan, Bichitr, and Payag, this study explores the role and aesthetic significance of animals and birds in the borders and main compositions of a few miniatures from the late 16th to the mid-17th centuries. The analysis highlights how animals, which were depicted with great observational precision and stylized grace, influenced Mughal ideas of harmony, beauty, and courtly sophistication. The symmetrical arrangements of birds and fauna in border illuminations, the symbolic usage of species such as lions, elephants, and peacocks in core themes, and the ornamental application of fauna in architectural and nature-themed backdrops all get special attention.*

Keywords: Mughal miniature painting, fauna, borders, motifs, Jahangir, natural history, Indo-Persian aesthetics, , Shah Jahan, culture, symbolism

Aim of the study

1; This study emphasizes the relationship between natural observation and formal stylization in Mughal art by setting these practices within the larger historical and cultural context of Mughal aesthetics under Emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan.

2; The incorporation of Indian, Persian, and European visual vocabulary is also investigated.

3; This research also contends that fauna served as a unifying motif linking nature, imperial ideology, and the ornamental drive within Mughal painting traditions.

Recent scholarship and interpretive interpretations corroborate the visual and stylistic analysis, providing insight into the broader cultural significance of animals in Mughal visual culture.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the aesthetic and symbolic significance of wildlife in Mughal miniature paintings, focusing on their arrangement in borders and primary subjects.

2. To investigate how natural observation and stylization of wildlife influenced the ornamental traditions of Mughal art under Jahangir and Shah Jahan.

3. To evaluate crosscultural creative influences (Persian, Indian, and European) in Mughal miniatures depicting animals and birds.

Methodology

This qualitative study employs an art historical and iconographic method, supplemented with visual analysis and interpretive comparisons of selected miniatures, SUCH AS

Primary Visual Analysis. The process includes analyzing illustrated folios from albums and manuscripts such as the Jehangirnama, Shah Jahan Album, and Khamisa of Nizami.

Stylistic and Iconographic Study: Studied the composition, anatomy, and gestures of wildlife in border illustrations, analyzing creative methods such as shading, proportion, color, and naturalism.

Comparative Study: Comparing images of fauna in Personate and Mughal models to identify changes in aesthetic function and meaning.

Introduction

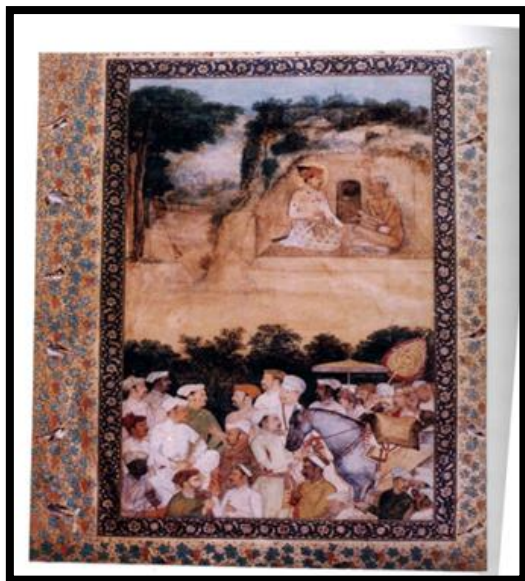
Mughal art engaged a prominent place in the history of Indian art and. After comprehensive study of the origin of Mughal School, it is believed that Mughal School had strong influences from Persian art and Indian school of Behzad. The Mughal emperors starting from Babar to Shah Jahan were the consumers of art and under their enthusiastic patronage and funding art and painting flourished up to unbelievable heights and their valuable contribution added contributions of the time to all forms of art. It was possible due to their regular and thoughtful devotion to art that it established a solid base for it, which later on became a fortress of art and was called Mughal School of art and miniature painting. The contribution of Persian artists in this respect also cannot be pushed into forgetfulness. Even today Mughal painting enjoys a distinctive and lofty status in the realm of art and all that was the product and formation of Mughal courts. The paintings of the courts of Akbar, Jahangir as well as Shah Jahan are different in style, method and content. All were not only subjective but perform great contributions in ornamental field of art. In Mughal region subjects were painted directly as a source idea or were used as decorative forms. The subjects do not convey any special message and are sometimes humorous or even ridiculous. The artists try to elevate the common place by painting an ordinary subject in such a way that it appeals to your eyes. The use of animals in the paintings mentioned here is decorative. A very serious subject is sometimes presented in a light mood like the painting of the resting lion in this chapter. With the name of a lion we imagine a picture of a dignified and serious animal. But in this miniature the relaxing king of the jungle is in a playful mood and is rolling on its back giving the feeling of a light mood. Another type of decorative paintings is the border illumination in which the fauna is restricted to the margins of the miniature. Borders form an important part of the miniature and are drawn with equal amount of care. There are symmetrically arranged animals and birds, as well as freely all over painted ones, in border decorations. Both types have been aesthetically arranged (Matloob, 2024). According to Singh (2020) observes that border illumination served as a secondary narrative space where fauna took on symbolic and aesthetic significance

"The gorgeous border decorations emerged for the first time in Mughal paintings under Jehangir and its feature also contributes to decorative formalism (Beach :2022)." Decorative designs in gold depicting scenes of fighting and animal hunts were popular (Koch, 2011; Beach, 1992) r. The subjects, such as colourful small, birds, are brilliantly set off against the gold design in some instances (V&A, 2025; Koch, 2017),). These birds are drawn realistically flying or balancing themselves adroitly on a twig (Verma, 2015).

JEHANGIR VISITING THE ASCETJCS-cl616-20-ASCRIBED TO GOVARDHAN-JEHANGIRNAMA

The below painting (fig: 1), is a typical border set up against a goldfish background. The birds, grapes and vine scrolls are looking very eye-catching against the light ground (Nasim, 2019). The birds are placed symmetrically at equal distances and are in a perfect harmony (Gonzalez, 2015) with the rest of the design. Their overall effect on the eye is very pleasant. The thin shading close to the outlines of the

birds' bodies gives them a three dimensional effect, weight and volume. The artist has rendered his subjects as realistically as was possible. The vine scrolls of a bluish green colour and the orange grapes form a mesh spreading into the margins around the painting. There is a variety of birds depicted in the border, such as, king fishers, golden orioles, etc. The birds systematically face the opposite directions i.e. one faces towards left and the other towards right side (Matloob, 2024).



Pl.I, Source: mughallibrary.com



Pl.II, Source: wikipedia.org/wiki/

Файл:Hunting_Scene,_dated_1591.2

HUNTING SCENE- 1591-ABD-AS-SAMAD AND MOHAMMAD SHARIF

The above (fig: 2), showing orangish-yellow background of this border has stylized floral patterns on it, of a pale yellow colour. The floral patterns are not very distinct and are difficult to make out due to their dullness. The brightly coloured birds painted on this border are very prominent upon the dull background. They seem as if they are coming out of the picture surface (Nasim, 2019). They are depicted in various elegant gestures, signifying the artist's knowledge and observation of these birds.

The painting within this border is of a hunting scene and the hunters are probably hunting birds. The birds in the borders might be the ones; the hunters have come to hunt. The couple of black birds with grey wings and tails resembles the common myna, the one to their right is a white bird with grey wings looking towards lefts side at a couple of white bodied birds, with red and blue wings, in the upper left corner. In the left margin, near the upper side is a couple of birds, the upper one is flying towards the left side, out of the picture and the one below is pushed without any apparent support and is facing to the right. The couple of birds below them close to the inner margin are Indian Grey Shrikes. Below them are a couple of light brown birds with dark wings and tails. The upper one is flying down towards its partner. The couple of bluish grey birds in the border, near the lower left corner of the painting, are Indian rollers. In the center of the lower horizontal border are Golden Orioles.

The one to the left is emerging from behind the flowers and is partly visible and its other partner is flying. They have yellow wings with black edges and they have black tails. The last pair of small birds. In the lower right corner are Ruffous Backed Shrikes with red bodies, bluish wings and tail and black edged wings. All the birds are placed at equal intervals (Safi, 2024) .

SHAH JEHAN AND ASAF KHAN-1645-50-BICHTR

Below (fig: 3),is a design of symmetrically placed flowers, scrolls and pairs of birds spreads over the entire border. This border is well spaced and is not as intricate, as the Mural borders usually are. The

rest of the design remains the same but the birds in every segment changes. There are birds, such as parrots, mynas, wood Peckers, etc. The border design is of arabesque character. The background here is also light brown or ochre in colour, against which the flowers, scrolls and birds seem very prominent. The lines are very fine and the technical mastery of the artist can be realized. Although there are empty spaces in this border, it still looks complete and very charming (Matloob, 2024; V&A, 2025).



Pl.III. <https://asia.si.edu/explore-art-culture/>

Pl.IV: Source, wikimedia.com

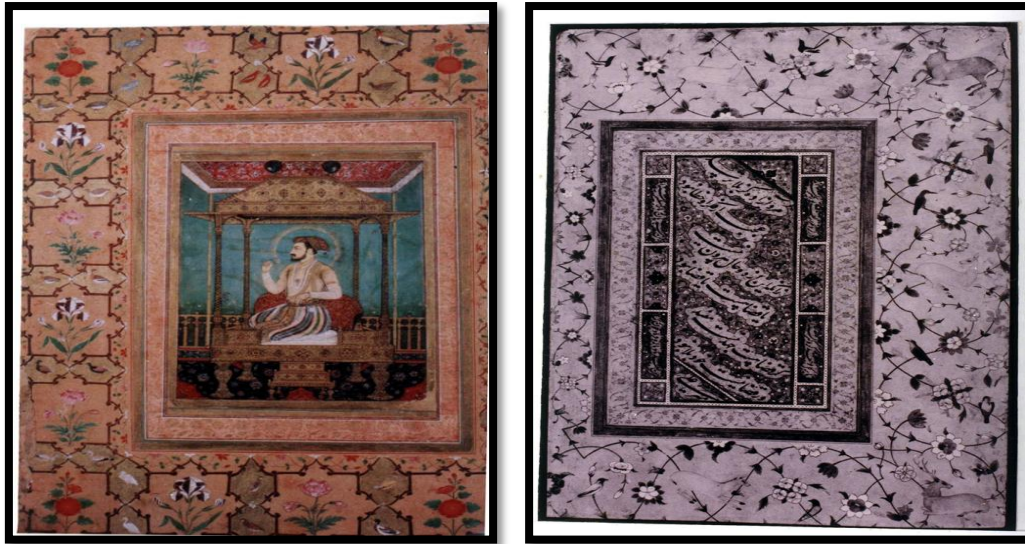
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OFFICERS SITTING UNDER A TREE-c1650-55- PAYAG

The above Pl (fig: 4), describing two shapes are repeated in this border, one is the circle and the other is an oval. The ovals in the right and left side margins have human figures, assumable of important officials of Shah Jahan. The circles in the left border have black and white birds, with a black head, wings and tail and white under side of their body with white stripes on their wings. They resemble Pied Bush chats. The two circles in the right border have dark coloured birds, having a white line near the edge of their wings. The ovals in the upper, horizontal margin have deer and the two circles on the left side have Chukars in them. These birds have heavy bodies and stripes of dark colour on their wings and around their neck. The two circles to the right have partridges in them. They have heavy, dark coloured, spotted bodies and a narrow neck with a small head. Their wing Tare light coloured and there is a light coloured band around their neck. The background of this border is also a pale colour. All the birds and animals are depicted in profile (Koch, 2011; Gonzalez, 2015).

SHAH JAHAN ON A PEACOCK THRONE-c1635-GOVARDHAN

(Fig: 5), showing Shah Jahan seated on his peacock throne is surrounded by and collaborate border, combining geometric shapes, floral motifs and fauna in one design. In the large squarish compartments are plants and flowers. At their intersections are small hexagons in which different species of birds are painted. This border must have required a lot of nature study. Male and female of each species are painted within adjacent hexagons. Only two hexagons in the top centre have one pair each. Each bird has been executed with great care and skill. Colors of these birds are very realistically depicted. There is common partridge, grey partridge, quail, gadwall, grey laggoose, great egret, chukar, mallard etc(V&A, 2025; Matloob, 2024).



Pl.V:Source,<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/> Pl.VI: Source,<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/>

A PAGE OF PERSIAN CALLIGRAPHY

Above (fig: 6), is a page from the Album of the late Shah Jahan. Mughals have long been using the Persian tradition of enhancing the purely abstract curves of calligraphy with vine tracteries in surrounding borders. Here we find Shah Jahan's preference for fantasy, which seems natural at first. Different types of flowers and leaves are placed on the same tendril and the vine scrolls are superimposed by the birds and animals. The fauna is recognizably Indian. The fauna is treated in detail. There are bright colored King Fischer's in the upper right corner, male and female Sanbar (Cervus Unicolor) at the bottom, and nigali in the middle and upper portions.

The birds and deer are delicately coloured and are regularly spaced at equal intervals determined by the rhythmic looping of the vine tendrils. Here we find a return to the classical types of Islamic geometric arrangement as compared to the spontaneously energetic decorations of Akbari and Jahangiri period (V&A, 2025; Gonzalez, 2015) .

JEHANGIR'S DREAM- C1618- ABULHASSAN SAINT PETERSBURG ALBUM

This painting (fig: 7),below is enclosed within three borders. The outermost border, which is the broadest, has a pale yellowish background. There are flowering plants with different flowers of bright as well as light colours. The plants are dark green in colour. This is the most colorful border of the three. There is no regular pattern of repetition. On the branches of flowering trees and between the bigger flowers, we find birds in different gestures. For example, the detail of the central part of the upper horizontal panel has a variety of tones in colours and the shading of the fauna as well as flora is very minute. One of the birds has turned its head and its beak is touching the leaves of the flowers as if it is going to eat the leaf. The body of this bird is light pink and a little bit of the same colour in its face balances its use in the body. Its wings and upper portion of its tail, as well as its head, is in tones of black and grey. The whole bird has been out-lined very finely, so that we do not actually feel as if it has an outline. The bird above has turned its head back and is facing to the right side, where there is a moth near its beak and its gesture suggests that it shall be eaten by the bird. On the left side of the bird's head is a butterfly, about to settle on a purple or mauve colour flower nearby. The motion of the wings of the moth and the butterfly is depicted in a perfect manner, suggesting the nature study and well trained eye of the artist. The-mouth and the butterfly are rendered in tones of grey. The body of the-mouth is very darkly coloured, with a little bit of light coming from the right side and the transparent wings are executed with great skill. They give the feeling of delicacy and fragility. The butterfly has a beautiful pattern of white patches, although it is not very colourful. The proportions of the bird, moth and

butterfly are comparable. The bird's head, wings and some of its body are greyish in colour and are of different specie than the one below. Light falls on it from the left side. Its face and body are pure white, with a delicate out line.

Similarly, there are other types of birds in the margin, painted in different gestures, in between the flowers. There are butterflies too. A bird in the upper left side is about to fly and in the corner above, is a butterfly in flight. In the left corner of the panel below are two birds exchanging food. A bird in the right side corner below has opened its beak and is ready to capture its prey, a butterfly flying in its direction. This bird is emerging from between two big red flowers, and has a red face, brown wings and white body. In the left side longitudinal panel are other birds. One is shown sideways and is trying to eat a butterfly. The other one has turned its face to the right and is painted straight. It has greyish and reddish tones in its body (Nasim, 2019; Safi, 2024) .



Pl.VII.<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/453259>

Pl.VIII.<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/453259>

A LION AT REST-c1585

The above (fig: 8) painting, explaining some attribute it to the early style of Mansur. The lion is placed horizontally in the lower half of the squarish- rectangular format. In the upper half between the branches of the bamboo are birds and moths. The lion is relaxing in a bamboo grove and is in a jolly mood It all are in aggressive mood as it is usually depicted He is lying on top of a patch of greenery, with small grass and bamboo shoots rising upwards. It is placed somewhat in the air as if it is floating weightlessly. The horizontal position suggests rest. The lion is painted in a style in between realistic and ornamental. Some of its body parts, such as its claws, alert eyes, cheeks and fur are sharply observed from nature. Whereas it's sweeping tail and curved lips are essentially of Iranian character. Its figure is trim and well-fed, with a tight and smooth skin stretching over its powerful and energetic muscles, and its strong skeleton. Its forelimbs are crossed in a natural manner, as can be observed in lions (they often sit in this position).

The twisted spine of the lion is rather unnatural, strange and humorous. The lion looks like a naughty pet rolling over on its back. Its paws have curled with sharp nails on the underside, as can be seen in the hind right limb. Its eyes are shining and alert. Its tongue protrudes out of its mouth. The pointed white teeth shining in its mouth sends shivers down ones spine. Its small, attentive and sharp ears are devoid of any bones and soft looking. The skin is wrinkled unsuccessfully at its waist to suggest the twist of its spine. The small black spots around its mouth have also been depicted. The wrinkles around its eyes, the lines in its skin, starting from its eye and extending downwards, its smooth skin, its mane

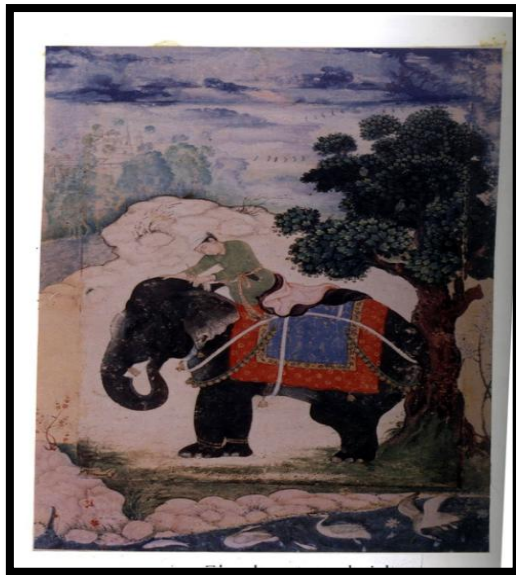
and its tail have been scrutinized in detail. Near the upper margin is a bird with a long tail, diving down at a dragonfly that it has spotted near the left margin. There is a black moth near the upper right margin, and a little below it is a yellow, small bird, with a black stripe on its wing, looking towards the left side. These small animals fill up the empty spaces in the miniature's upper parts. The lion is pale brown in colour, with yellowish brown eyes. Light areas of almost white colour are on the upper side of its raised left hind limb, on the fold of its skin, on its waist, neck, in the right ear and the margin of its body close to the ground. With a few dark touches, beautiful shading has been achieved (Gonzalez, 2015; Exotic India, 2000).

The subject of this painting is an unusual one, as a lion is often painted as a fearsome beast and a graceful king of the jungle. Never has it been shown in such a light mood and character before. It shows the imaginativeness of the artist.

ELEPHANT AND RIDER-C1585-KESU DAS

This painting (fig: 9), shows Kesu Das's love for nature very clearly. It is an independent miniature of Kesu Das. It has a beautiful landscape of trees, and blue sky and clear water, against which is an elephant quite huge in size, on top of which is mounted a rider who is either very tired and is resting or he is broken hearted and despaired. The horse is decorated with a colorful embroidered cloth on its back. The cloth has a red border and a blue centre. The two colours are separated by a golden coloured embroidered band. Small flowers have been embroidered on this cloth. There are two lines, one in front of the elephant and the rather on its lower region to which many small bells are attached. It has a white rein of pearls on its back and there is a strap-of pearls around its neck, which has jell attached to it hanging down at its neck. The tusk of the elephant is broken and has three gold bangles decorating it. It has a golden small bell hanging from its ear serving the purpose of an earring. There are two golden chains in each of its forelimbs. A golden chain is tied around its breast from which hangs down a small bell. The artist has decorated the elephant with all sorts of jewelry as if it is a ride. There are so many bells attached to its body that one can imagine the tinkling sound the elephant must make when it moves. At the moment it is at rest. Like its owner, and the bells are silent. It also shows that its owner is a man who keeps it well and decorated.

The pond in front has three ducks and two fish. The duck in front has gracefully turned its head to look at the one behind it, while the third one just flew to the air with its neck turned to look behind. The fish between the first two ducks is small and swimming in the waters, while the one near the left hand side has leapt out of the water into the air and is diving back. The whole scene is very poetical in nature and the animals add beauty to it, making it more complete. The elephant has been placed near the lower edge in the centre from the sides of the picture. The elephant along with the tree behind it dominates the picture. A sense of perspective has been achieved by suggesting birds far away in the sky by mere brush strokes of fading colour, due to atmospheric perspective (V&A, 2025; Matloob, 2024).



Pl.XI: <https://www.christies.com/>



Pl.X: <https://asia-archive.si.edu/object/F1959.3/en/lot/lot-6335916>

MAJNUN WEeping OVER HIS FATHER'S GRAVE- C1595-MANOHar- KHAMSA OF NIZAMI

The painting (f: 10), shows a border decoration of this miniature exhibits a hunting scene. It is monochromatically rendered. The border has been painted on an ochre paper, with a darker colour, almost in outlines. Only the head of the hunter in the upper margin has been painted in detail and it stands out. He is aiming at an antelope in front of him that is following a deer. Different wild animals have been painted amongst a landscape of rocks and plants. Most of the animals are running in a swift, sweeping manner. In the left margin there are antelopes, deer's, a cow with a bird sitting on its back, a wild goat or marcher sitting down to relax and some birds. In the lower margin different animals are being chased by a leopard symbolizing the event of a hunt taking place without actually showing the hunt.

There are plants in the right side margin with a few birds here and there. Even in this small space available and the tightly knit composition the artist has skillfully managed to produce fine results. No detail of the animal or bird has been ignored. From the texture of the leopard's skin to the horns of the antelope, every detail has been painted. Excellent results have been achieved with minimum brush work. The anatomy and proportions of all animals and birds are perfectly rendered. All the animals are in different poses (Koch, 2011; Safi, 2024).

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