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Beyond Imperial Patronage: Artist Agency, Identity and Social Status in Mughal Painting, c. 1550-1650

Moumita Manna[1]

[1]Independent Researcher
Department of Islamic History & Culture
University of Calcutta,
Kolkata,West Bengal, India
Email: mannamoumita2702@gmail.com

Abstract: *The history of Mughal painting between approximately 1550 and 1650 has often been narrated through the preferences, ideologies and political ambitions of imperial patrons. This study shifts the focus from imperial patronage to the agency, identity and social status of Mughal painters. It examines Mughal painters as historically situated agents whose identities developed through workshop practice, artistic-collaboration, expertise, signatures, self-fashioning, mobility and system of courtly rewards. Drawing on Persian chronical, manuscript colophons, inscription, album ascriptions, portraits and visual analysis, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining art history, social history and material culture. It argues that artistic agency in the Mughal atelier did not signify modern individual autonomy; rather it operated through collaboration, institutional participation, technical innovation and the production of imperial knowledge. Particular attention is given to the tasvir-khana, the relationship between collective authorship and individual recognition and the ways signatures and artistic titles negotiated humility and visibility. This study further demonstrates that painters occupied an intermediate yet influential social position: subordinate within the political hierarchy but increasingly recognised as specialised producers of knowledge and visual culture. Ultimately, Mughal painting emerges as a negotiated process in which patronage and artistic agency mutually shaped the visual identity of the empire.*

Keywords:*Imperial , Identity, Mughal Painting, Manuscript culture, Social status etc.*

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Introduction

"*banda-yi bā-ikhlās*" – "The Devoted Slave"
-Bichitr, inscription on Jahangir preferring a Sufi Shaikh to kings, c.1615-18

Beyond Imperial Patronage: Artist Agency, Identity and Social Status in Mughal Painting, c. 1550-1650

Mughal painting emerged as one of the most sophisticated visual traditions of early modern South Asia. Between the accession of Akbar in 1556 and the middle decades of Shah Jahan's reign, painting developed from a predominately manuscript-based practice into a broad system of imperial representation encompassing illustrated histories, albums, portraits, natural-history studies, court ceremonies, dynastic myths, religious encounters and diplomatic imagery. The period witnessed the establishment of a large and disciplined imperial atelier, the incorporation of Persian, Indian, Central Asian, European visual resources and the increasing recognition of individual painters such as Basawan, Daswanth, Kesu Das, Manohar, Govardhan, Bishandas, Abu'l Hasan, Ustad Mansur, Bichitr and Payag. Yet the conventional narrative continues to treat these artists principally as instruments of imperial patronage.This emphasis is understandable. Mughal paintings were produced within a courtly economy in which the emperor-controlled resources, commissions, rewards and access to prestige. Abu'l Fazal's *A'in-I Akbari*, for example, presents Akbar as the source of excellence in almost every branch of imperial production, including painting. The text claims that under Akbar's supervision colour acquired new beauty and that the delicacy, clarity and boldness of painting reached perfection.[1] Such statements establish an ideological framework in which artistic achievement becomes evidence of the ruler's superior intellect and administrative capacity. The painter's accomplishment is absorbed into the emperor's image.

This study asks whether Mughal painting can be understood beyond this model of unilateral imperial patronage. It explores four related questions:

i. How did Mughal painters exercise agency within the institutional and ideological limits of the imperial atelier?
ii. In what ways did signatures, self-portraits, artistic titles and workshop records contribute to the formation of painterly identity?
iii. How did the social status of painters change between the reigns of Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan?
iv. How did artists participate in the construction of imperial identity rather than merely illustrating an identity already formed by the emperor?

This study adopts a multidisciplinary methodology integrating visual analysis, social history, material culture and close reading of Persian sources including Abu'l Fazl's *Akbarnama* and *A'in-I Akbari*, Jahangir's memoirs, manuscript inscriptions, album ascriptions, colophons, imperial portraits, illustrated histories and surviving works attributed

to individual painters. These sources are approached critically rather than treated as transparent records of social reality. Court chronicles, for example, are rhetorical texts that construct the emperor as the source of order and artistic excellence. Likewise, inscriptions and attributions may reflect later album compilation practices rather than original authorship as demonstrated by evidence from the Royal Collection.[2]

The research objectives are therefore threefold. First, it reconstructs the institutional position of the painter within the Mughal court. Second, it examines how artist negotiated anonymity and recognition through collaborative practice, signatures, titles and visual self-representation. Third, it proposes a model of agency suited to early modern court culture – one that does not equate agency with independence from patronage but recognises agency as the ability to act meaningfully through institutions, conventions, materials and relationships.

The argument proceeds from the premise that Mughal painting was neither simply a royal propaganda machine nor a field of autonomous artistic expression. It was a collaborative system in which painters' knowledge, technical skill and imagination made imperial power visible and persuasive, shaping Mughal kingship, courtly hierarchy and claims to cultural university.

Mughal painting developed across a connected geography linking Central Asia, Iran, Northern and Western India with the movement of artists, manuscripts, techniques, pigments, papers, prints and ideas shaping its pictorial traditions. Its Persianate foundations were strengthened during Humayun's exile in Iran, where is association with Safavid court culture brought Mir Sayyid Ail and Abd al-Samad into the Mughal orbit. They later supervised artists in Akbar's atelier, where Persian conventions interacted with established Indian traditions of mural, manuscript and devotional painting.[3] Akbar's territorial expansion further broadened the atelier's social and geographical base, bringing artists of different regions, religious, training and technical specialisations into imperial service through projects such as the *Hamzanama*, *Razmnama*, *Akbarnama*, *Tutinama.* Thus, Mughal paintings were not simply "Persian influence" modified by "Indian vitality".[4] From 1580 onward, European engravings and devotional images brought through Jesuit missions were also copied, recombined and transformed by Mughal artists.[5] Under Jahangir, Lahore and Agra remain major centres, while albums and individual folios circulated between court, provincial and private collections. Shah Jahan further consolidated painting's role in ceremonial kingship; The

Padshahnama exemplifies this political geography by presenting the court as an ordered centre from which sovereignty radiated across the empire.[6]

Earlier scholarship on Mughal painting largely followed dynastic chronology and stylistic development, with Percy Brown, Laurence Binyon and others tracing its evolution from Persian origins toward Indian naturalism and decline after Shan Jahan. Though valuable for identifying major manuscripts and styles, this approach often treated artists as products of imperial periods rather than historical actors. Milo C. Beach advanced the filed by linking style with imperial patronage, manuscript production and individual painters.[7] While John Seyller's Studies of inscriptions, scribal notes and manuscripts production revealed evidence of workshop organisation, artistic collaboration and individual roles.[8] Ebba Koch further situated Mughal art within imperial ideology, showing through architecture, ceremony, portraiture and the *Padshahnama* – how images constructed kingship, hierarchy and legitimacy.[9] More recent scholarship, particularly Yael Rice's work has emphasised materiality, labour, networks and artists social positions, viewing painters as active participants in courtly intellectual and social life.[10] The central historiographical issue, therefore, is not the absence of artists but the tendency to see them either as anonymous craftsmen or isolated "master artists." This study instead views artist identity as relational and institutionally produced through training, collaboration, patronage, titles, workshop ranks, religious language and the circulation of finished works, positioning the painter as neither invisible nor fully autonomous but as negotiating identity within the court's social and ideological structures,

The central theorical concept of this study is agency, understood not as individual expression or resistance but as the capacity to make meaningful choices within Mughal structures of patronage, hierarchy and convention. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' helps explain how painters developed a 'courtly self' through skills, protocols, collaboration and imperial service.[11] Howard Becker's concept of "art worlds" further highlights the collective nature of Mughal production, involving patrons, designers, painters, calligraphers and other specialists. Painterly identity also crossed ethnic and religious boundaries, as artists such as Basawan, Daswanth, Kesu Das, Manohar, Govardhan and Payag participated in a shared Persianate court culture, where skill, titles, proximity and reputation shaped status. Thus, this study reads signatures not merely as marks of authorship but as also statements.

The Imperial Atelier

The Mughal *tasvir-khana* or image house, was an institution of production, training, record keeping and socialisation. It was not simply a room where painters executed imperial commands. Artists were appointed, ranked, supervised, rewarded and evaluated. The atelier transformed painting into a regularised branch of imperial service. The *A'in-I Akbari* offers important evidence of this institutional status. Abu'l Fazl names numerous painters and calligraphers in the section devoted to the painting workshop.[12]

The Mughal atelier challenges the idea of the artist as a solitary creator, as projects like the *Hamzanama* depended on specialised collaboration. Yet collective production allowed individual agency through distinctive styles and technical skills, which could enhance reputation, status and access to imperial commissions. Akbar broadened painting's scope through histories, translations, religious subjects, geography, animals and courtly life. the *Razmnama,* the Persian Mahabharata, exemplifies this by requiring artists to interpret unfamiliar characters, landscapes, rituals and narratives rather than simply reproduce existing models.

Collaboration and Authorship

Mughal manuscript production was fundamentally a collaborative, involving multiple forms of artistic authorship, including designer, painters, finishers, librarians and album compilers, making individual attribution complex while revealing the collective nature of artistic practice. The distinction between the *tarrah* or *tarh* (designer) and painter shows a specialised division of labour in which originality extended beyond brushwork to conception and composition. Yet collaboration did not erase individual artistic identity, Mughal connoisseurs distinguished artists skill and style, recognising individual hands through features such as faces, hands, animals, foliage, rocks and textiles while Abu'l Fazl's descriptions of "rare masters", "forerunners" and "pinnacles of the age" established a vocabulary of artistic distinction.[13] Similarly, the practice of coping earlier compositions, European prints or colleague's works likewise involved transformation through changes in proportion, gesture, costume, expression and setting. Under Jahangir, such artistic discernment strengthened the value and visibility of individuals artists, though their status remained dependent on imperial patronage.

Signatures and Self-fashioning

Signatures and artistic attribution provide important evidence of self-representation and identity among Mughal painters. Although artists frequently described themselves through differential terms such as *banda* (servant) or *al-abd* (the slave), such expression reflected the conventional language of humility within Persianate court culture and could simultaneously communicate loyalty, devotion and proximity to imperial power. Bichitr's signature on the famous image of Jahangir seated on the hourglass throne is a particularly revealing example. The artists identities himself as a devoted slave and places the inscription near the emperor's footstool (Fig.1,2).[14]

This position acknowledges hierarchy but the signature also ensure that the painter's name survives beside one of the most conceptually complex images of Mughal kingship. Bichitr's humility is therefore not simple self-erasure. It is carefully calibrated form of presence.[15] Similarly, artistic specialisation becomes a means of constructing professional identity, as seen in Ustad Mansur's celebrated studies of animals and birds, which demonstrated his exceptional observational and representational skills. In the portraiture of artists such as Bishandas and Abu'l Hasan, whose ability in depicting distinguished personalities brought them considerable imperial trust and diplomatic importance.

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Fig.1 Fig.2

Emperor on a pedestal (detail), Bichitr, margins by Muhammad Sadiq,
Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings from the "St. Petersburg Album,"
1615-18, opaque watercolour, gold and ink on paper, 46.9 x 30.7 cm
(National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.)

Artists and Social Status

The social status of Mughal painters cannot be understood simply as elite versus artisan. Though dependent servants, some gained distinction through skill, proximity to the emperor, access to rewards and their role in producing imperial knowledge. The *A'in-I Akbari* praises painters for rare accomplishments, while Abu'l Fazl's naming of them itself provided social recognition. Their work represented the emperor and dynasty, giving the painter's hand a role in imperial identity. Under Jahangir, connoisseurship and naturalistic representation further increased painting's social value, though prestige remained conditional. Painters were not ruling elites like mansabdars or princes and depended on continued imperial favour. The survival of particular names also reflects the contingencies of manuscript preservation, attribution and collecting.[16] The atelier religious and ethnic diversity further complicates status as Hindu painters served Muslim emperors within a shared Persianate institutional culture. They were subordinate within the political hierarchy but significant within the cultural and epistemological order of the empire.

Visualising Imperial Identity

Mughal painters did not merely depict an imperial identity; they actively constructed it by shaping the appearance of rulers, courtly hierarchy, religious encounters and the emperor's relationship with nature. Akbar's visual identity emerged through portrait, historical scenes, hunting and representations of intellectual and religious discussion, presenting him as both an organiser of events and a seeker of knowledge. The illustration *Akbarnama* was central to this process, transforming his reign into a visual narrative of action and authority through battles, ceremonies, punishments, building projects and acts of courage. These images did more than repeat the text, creating visual emphasis through gesture, spatial arrangement, colour and focus on the imperial body.[17]

The *Razmnama* expended Mughal imperial identity by incorporating the Sanskritic world of the Mahabharata into Persianate court culture, as painters translated the Indic epic into visual language accessible to Mughal viewers making cultural incorporation visible.[18] Under Jahangir portraiture, allegory and natural-history studies emphasized the emperor's body and perception, presenting him as a connoisseur capable of discerning hidden truths. Mughal images thus constructed painting as a form of knowledge through physiognomy, dreams and nature.[19] Bichitr's image of Jahangir preferring a Sufi Shaykh to kings illustrated this vision

(Fig.1,2). Under shah Jahan, imperial identity became more formal and ceremonial with the emperor positioned as the stable centre of a hierarchical universe. The *Padshahnama* exemplifies this through controlled representations of court ceremonies and military events, using facial expression, gestures, textiles, architecture and marginal figures to give social depth to the official image of order.[20]

Artistic Identity and Courtly Discipline

Artist agency should not be romanticised as resistance to the Mughal Court. Painters were shaped by discipline, repetition, hierarchy and service. They worked according to schedules, received instructions and participated in projected whose subjects were determined by patrons and administrations. Their identities were produced through obedience as well as innovation. This relationship can be understood through the idea of "courtly discipline." To became a successful Mughal painter, an artist had to master more than technique. He had to learn how to behave in the presence of power, how to represent the emperor respectfully. How to manage collaboration and how to make innovation appear compatible with tradition. The language of humility in signatures was one part of this discipline.[21] A skilled painter who understood institutional expectations could manipulate them creatively. The relationship between obedience and creativity is especially visible in portraiture. The emperor required recognisable likenesses but painter also had to communicate character, rank, age, temperament and spiritual quality. A portrait was therefore both a regulated representation and an interpretive act.[22]

The originality of this research lies in shifting the focus from imperial patronage as a system of control to patronage as a filed of negotiation. The emperor's patronage made the atelier possible, but the atelier's artists shaped what patronage meant in visual practice.

First, this study treats signatures and humble self-descriptions as active forms of identify-making rather than evidence of complete subordination. The phrase "servant of the emperor" could simultaneously acknowledge hierarchy, claim, proximity and preserve the artist's name within the imperial record.

Second, the research interprets collaboration as a form of agency. Collective production did not erase individual contribution. Instead, it created a structured environment in which different forms of expertise could become visible through style, task and attribution.

Third, this study connects artist identity to knowledge production. Painters did not simply illustrate texts or decorate royal albums. They transformed political, religious, scientific and geographical information into visual forms. Their agency was epistemic as well as aesthetic.

Fourth, this study combines social status with visual identity. The painter's position cannot be reconstructed only from salaries or titles. It must also be studied through the kinds of images he was trusted to produce, the proximity of his signature to the emperor and the circulation of his works.[23]

Finally, the research proposes a historically specific concept of agency. Mughal artists were neither autonomous modern individuals nor anonymous artisans. They were relational agents whose power emerged through service, collaboration, embodied skill and participation in the production of imperial truth.

Conclusion

Mughal painting between 1550 and 1650 was created within imperial institutions but it cannot be explained by imperial patronage alone. Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan supplied commissions, resources, ideological direction and system of reward. Yet painters transformed these conditions into images through choices that involved composition, observation, adaptation, collaboration and self-representation. The Mughal artist occupied a complex social position. He was a servant of the emperor but also a recognised master; a member of a collective workshop, sometimes an identifiable stylist; a subordinate within the political order but an indispensable producer of imperial knowledge. His signature might express humility but it could also secure visibility. His collaboration might appear anonymous but it contributed to a corporate artistic identity that made the imperial atelier effective.

The distinction between patron and artist should therefore not be understood as a simple opposition between power and powerlessness. Mughal sovereignty depended upon artistic meditation. The emperor's authority became visible through the painter's hand, while the painter's status was established through participation in the emperor's visual world. Patronage was consequently a relationship of dependence and mutual construction. The history of Mughal painting is best understood as a history of negotiated agency. Artists worked within hierarchies but they were not passive. They negotiated identity through signatures, titles, style, subject matter and collaboration. They negotiated social status through technical expertise and courtly recognition. They negotiated cultural difference by

combining Persianate, Indic, Central Asian and European forms. Above all, they helped make the Mughal empire imaginable as a universal, ordered, knowledgeable and visually compelling polity.[24]

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