

SYNOPSIS

**“The Genre of Mughal Portraiture Painting in its
Intellectual Context: 1550-1657”**

By

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Synopsis of the thesis entitled:

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This dissertation attempts to assess the contribution of the Mughal portrait makers, and how the portraits are crucial to our understanding of both the Mughal imperial structure and the people of the age. The Mughal artists were accorded an important place at court and amongst the elites, and more importantly in their political agenda. The artists' self-portraiture and often also the inclusion of their signature confirm a patronage that permitted such assertion.

The portraits of the Mughal elite groups reveal the political temper of the time and, importantly, also reflect a defined Mughal imperialist ideology. The visual imagery was so developed as to project to the viewer the divine status of the rulers and their unquestionable sovereignty. Closely related to this is the development of Mughal imperial iconography. This thesis examines these issues and traces in conjunction the dissemination of these elements to the smallest unit of state power extending to the ordinary common gentry as well as involving the busy commercial centres both in the urban and rural areas. The imperial portraits which were painted in juxtaposition with motifs like, for example, land and landscape, shed light on aspects of imperial authority. Importantly, these revelations act as aids in assessing the peasantry, landownership, and the landowner. These insights underline the strength of the imperial vision and the intellectual as also the artistic resolve to formulate a visual ideology that sought to narrate and at the same time modulate the viewer's historical insight.

In the final analysis, however, the Mughal school of art remained largely elitist in essence and practice. Perhaps this was because of its use of a sophisticated technique of painting and expensive material. It remained indifferent to image-making devices such as the printing press, the art of engraving, and to the medium of oil. Nonetheless, imperial portraits did engage in the representation of the non-elite and created an audience for such work. This was made possible largely through the dissemination of imperial art to sub-imperial workshops from where it infiltrated the floating studios of the bazaar artists. The bazaar portraitists at the regional market level were influenced in their theme and style by the art generated in the sub-imperial studios.

While Mughal portraits help to reinforce, or even supplement, our understanding of medieval India, they also help in illuminating the marginalized sections of the Mughal empire such as artisans, labourers and women. This thesis analyses contemporary gender politics and aspects such as public visibility and private hierarchy in the context of the information that can be derived from representations of the female form. These representations, complex as they are, help bridge the gaps in information in historical writing.

Significantly, I attempt to expand our knowledge of the Mughal structure on a basis that vitally searches the extant primary material and critically assess the portrait creation of both the ‘major’ and ‘minor’ artists. In conjunction with the written texts and chronicles the extensive visual idiom of the Mughals is studied and analysed to establish the wider historical implications of this language intrinsic in the portraits.