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Mughal masterworks

Although no knowledge of Indian history is required to enjoy this completely delicious and satisfying jewel of a show in all its colourful brilliance, texture and spiritual nourishment, some might prove helpful. Robin Richmond reviews *Garden and Cosmos - the Royal Paintings of Jodhpur*.

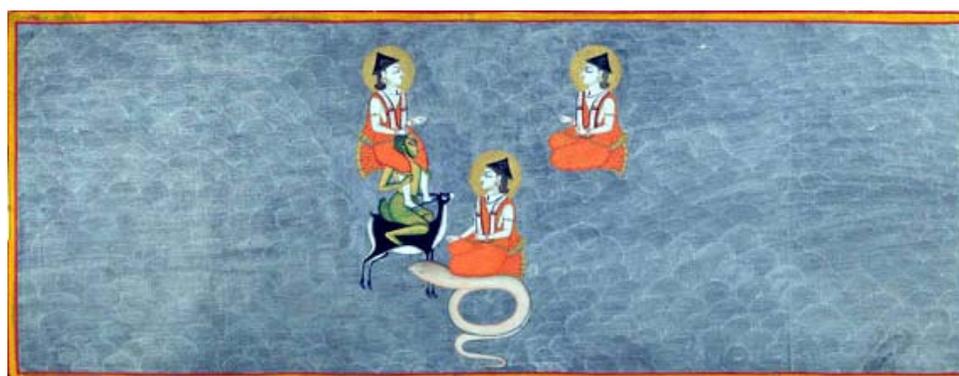
In 1564, Michelangelo died in Rome and William Shakespeare was born in Stratford upon Avon. In that same year, an event of similar cultural importance occurred thousands of miles away from Europe – in both a figurative and literal sense.

In Northwest India, on the wild, windswept rim of the Thar Desert in the Kingdom of Jodhpur and Marwar (now known as Rajasthan), the Muslim Mughal emperor Akbar the Great, scion of Persianised Turko-Mongols and grandson of Babur, the dynasty's founder, seized the reigns of power and 36,000 miles of land from Rao Jodha, leader of the 15th generation of noblemen of the Hindu clan of the Rathores.

The Rathore Rajput kings, whose name literally means “the sons of kings” claim their descent from the Kshatriyas, the caste of Hindu hereditary warriors, and their clan, founded in 1226 by Rao Sheogi, was a grand dynasty with elaborate religious and spiritual practices – all encompassed in their art.



The Equivalence of Self & Universe
“The Muslim Artist” (Bulaki), 1824
© Mehrangarh Museum Trust



Cosmic Oceans. From the Nath Charit. Attributed to Bulaki, 1823 © Mehrangarh Museum Trust

By the time Akbar invaded Marwar, Rao Jodha (after whom the city of Jodhpur is named) had begun to build Mehrangarh Fort, the “fort of the sun”. At 400 feet above the desert, this grandest of palaces and museums is the living breathing core of this great city, known as the “blue” city for its azure, oddly Cubist houses that crouch decoratively at its base and the fort is the source of the paintings in this show.

In conjunction with the Rathores, the Mughal Emperors were supreme in India until the middle of the 19th century and in various guises were the patrons of some of the greatest artists,

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calligraphers, architects and designers in the world. Unlike their European counterparts, Mughal artists were almost all anonymous and their work was collaborative and workshop-based. Today, this custom prevails practically unchanged in India, except for the nature of painting materials. Painters use single-hair squirrel brushes now as then, and a visit to Rajasthan is not complete without a visit to a painting workshop. This author saw the most complex, large and detailed copy of a Mughal painting, replete with a cast of thousands, put together by three painters in only one week.



Maharaja Bakhat Singh Rejoices during Holi. Attributed here to "Artist 3". Nagaur, c. 1748-50

© Mehrangarh Museum Trust

The cult of the maverick artist was unknown in India until fairly recently – a different perspective from the guild-centred studios of Renaissance Italy or the theatres of Elizabethan England. Mughal art, which deftly combines the decorative, Islamic calligraphic intricacy of Persia with the openly human, often erotic qualities of India, is emblematic of what we now – only relatively recently – refer to as India.

Delhi's Red Fort, Fatepur Sikri and the Taj Mahal, among many other architectural treasures, are all Mughal masterworks on a grand scale. Mughal painting, often miniaturised, is no less important. However, uniquely, the paintings in this show are much larger than is usual and more monumental as a result. None of these paintings have ever been seen before in Europe, and some never in India itself.

The present Maharajah, Gaj Singh II, 38th in an unbroken line of nobles, is responsible for the fort being the cultural jewel it is today, and is the creator of the Mehrangarh Museum Trust. He has single-mindedly devoted himself to bringing to public attention some of India's greatest art and Merangargh is the source of all this immense artistic wealth.

This large show at the British Museum – which of course has age-old links with Imperial India – really divides itself into two main sections devoted to two Rajput Maharajas. In a selection of 54 paintings from the royal collection at Merangargh, the first rooms show us the scenes of hunting, pleasure seeking lotus eaters and the work commissioned by the 18th century Maharajah Bakhat Singh and gives us vicarious access to detailed depiction of life in the royal

court worthy of Kubla Khan.

In contrast, the long reign of his grandson Man Singh displays art of a much more spiritual nature, with a decided interest in the numinous and metaphysical. A fervent follower of the Nath yogis who practiced Hatha yoga in great austerity, some of these paintings might be seen as meditative prayer rather than art.

The last room of the show is even a mystery to the curators in its other-worldly and arcane iconography. A large, almost minimalist painting that would not be out of place in a contemporary art gallery today is

Three Aspects of the Absolute (by Bulaki and painted in 1823) This is India in all her complexity and simplicity – colour, balance, beauty and the cosmos all in one.

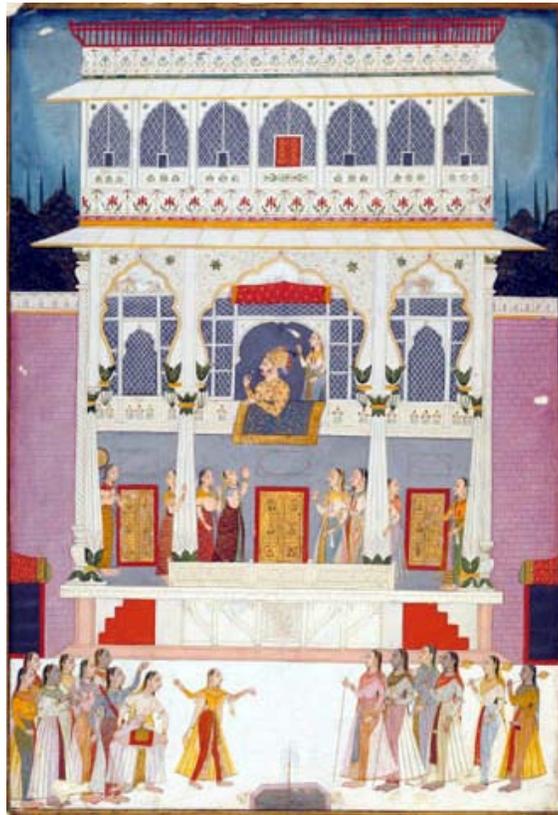
The show is part of a season at the BM called Indian Summer and there is an excellent series of accompanying events, not least food tastings, music and dance performances, and a rather peculiar collaboration with Kew in which mountain, tropical and desert plants occupy a small concrete corner of the museum's courtyard.

The descendant of the Moghul Lord Akbar, the great Shah Jahan, patron/sponsor of the Taj Mahal once wrote: "If there is Paradise, it is here, it is here." Yes, it is – right in London WC1.

30 May 2009

Garden and Cosmos - the Royal Paintings of Jodhpur [British Museum](#), extended to 11 October 2009

- Robin Richmond's [website](#)



Maharaja Bakhat Singh at the Jharokha Window of the Bakhat Singh Mahal

Attributed here to "Artist 2". Nagaur, 1737

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