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Images of subversion: The jharokha portrait in the mewar ramayana

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Abstract
This paper specifically examines the *jharokha* portrait within the context of Rajput art, focusing on the Mewar Ramayana. The paper delves into the rich tradition of portraiture in India, which is often perceived as having flourished predominantly during the Mughal era. Contrary to the belief that portraiture was non-existent before the Mughals, evidence from Kushan coinage, Chola temple art, and ancient Indian treatises like the Vishnudharmottara Purana and Chitralakshana suggest its earlier existence. The Mughal period, however, marked a significant enhancement in the art form, driven by increased European contact and the Mughals' keen interest in historical documentation. The arrival of Jesuit missions bearing European artworks influenced Mughal painters, leading to a more naturalistic approach in portraiture. Akbar's historian, Abu'l Fazl, recognized this European impact, noting how it animated inanimate subjects. Akbar's commissioning of an extensive album of likenesses of his grandees and himself epitomizes this period's advancements. This momentum continued under Jahangir and Shah Jahan, with the introduction of the *jharokha* portrait—a bust portrait showing the sitter above a parapet—which signified a notable shift from full-length portraits. The *jharokha* style even influenced Rajput painting, reflecting a nuanced interplay of homage and subtle defiance towards Mughal conventions. Despite the ostensibly cordial relations between the Maharanas of Mewar and the Mughals, an underlying rivalry is evident. The analysis of *jharokha* portraits in Rajput paintings in this paper highlights the cultural and political dynamics at play, illustrating how art serves as both a medium of reverence and resistance.

Keywords: Portraiture, *Jharokha*, Mughals, Ramayana, Rajputs

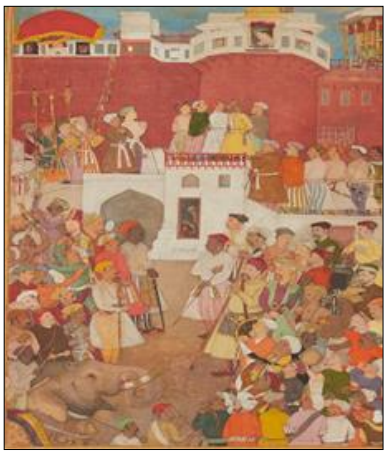
Introduction

One of the most explored fields in art history, portraiture in India was deemed non-existent before the arrival of the Mughals. Prior to them, the Kushan kings were portrayed on coins while bronze and stone portraits were included in Chola temples. Ancient treatises on Indian art, such as the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* and *Chitralakshana*, contain references to portraiture, thereby strengthening the view that portraiture existed before the Mughals. While it may not have originated with the Mughals, the art of portraiture nevertheless flourished under their patronage. Mughal portraits appeared on the scene when there was an increase in contact between Europe and Asia and are still hailed by scholars as the finest paintings produced in South Asia at that time.

The Mughal Portraits

With the European Renaissance, there was a turn toward the individual in art and in literature. Therefore, the portrait appears in the domain of painting. The encounter of the Mughals with the Europeans increased as Jesuit missions arrived with gifts for the emperor Akbar, which included the Polyglot Bible, illustrated atlas and other paintings. This, coupled with the interest of Mughals in historical documentation, influenced the painters in the Mughal atelier to develop the art of portraiture. Akbar's historian Abu'l Fazl openly acknowledged the European influence on Mughal realistic painting, as he mentioned how their art bestowed life upon inanimate objects. As a result of this European influence, there was seen a transition towards more naturalistic portraiture during the end of Akbar's reign. A milestone in portraiture was reached with the commissioning of the great album by Akbar, in which he ordered that the likenesses be painted of his grandees and himself. Abu'l Fazl, in his *Ain-i-Akbari*, remarked that "an immense album was thus formed: those that have passed away have received a new life, and those who are still alive have immortality promised them" (115).

While vital developments were made under Akbar's rule, portraiture as a genre flourished under Jahangir and Shah Jahan. In addition to the most prevalent type of portraiture, i.e., the full-length portrait, there appeared the *jharokha* portrait under Jahangir. The *jharokha* portrait is a "rectangular or square small portrait with the bust of the sitter visible above a parapet" (Losty 02). The movement towards a bust portrait from a full-length one is regarded as an "imaginative leap" (Losty 07).



(Jahangir at the jharokha in the Agra Fort observing the chain of justice. From the Jahangirnama, 1622 by Abu'l Hasan, from Wikimedia commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:25_Abu%27l_Hasan._Emperor_Jahangir_At_The_Jharoka_Window_Of_The_Agra_Fort,_ca._1620,_Aga_Khan_Museum.jpg)

In this painting from the *Jahangirnama* by Abu'l Hasan, Jahangir is seen at the *jharokha* window, observing the chain of justice. The painting depicts Jahangir in the act of *jharokha darshana*, a ritual that began with Akbar where the emperor was supposed to show himself to his subjects each day after sunrise through the *jharokha* window. In his introduction to the book *Portraiture In South Asia Since The Mughals: Art, Representation And History*, Crispin Branfoot remarks:

The ceremony was termed *darshana*, the same Sanskrit term used for the auspicious sight or exchange of vision with temple deities, emphasizing the eclectic character of Mughal kingship (15).

From the sixteenth century onwards, a certain protocol with respect to the visual presence of the emperor, both in court and in painting, was followed. The ritual of *jharokha darshana* emerges out of such a protocol. The term *jharokha* was used to refer to not just the window on the outer wall of the palace at great height, but also to the throne balcony in the public hall where the emperor received his courtiers. This was also placed high above the assembly. The first time that Jahangir mentions *jharokha*, it is used to prohibit any official, regardless of his position, to appear in the manner of the emperor. A closer look at the picture of Jahangir shows him placing his hand on the parapet of the window, over which is draped a cloth or a carpet. The use of this carpet or cloth over the *jharokha* window was Jahangir's innovation. The incorporation of the parapet hints towards the preoccupation of the Mughal artists of the time with depth. Furthermore, Jahangir would not have preferred to have a portrait merely depicting the head and the neck, as if severed. In this case, the parapet would not just provide the reason for the visibility of only the bust, but it would also set Jahangir apart. It is interesting to note that the *jharokha* portrait type makes its way into Rajput paintings as early as the seventeenth century. The Rajputs came into contact with Mughal culture in the late sixteenth century. By accepting Mughal sovereignty, many Rajput kings continued to rule and to exercise their power. Marriage alliances between the Mughals and the Rajputs, the induction of Rajput kings into military and administrative posts, along with the norm of Rajput princes attending the Mughal court paved the way for a rich cultural and linguistic exchange between the two groups. Rajput courts established ateliers following the Mughal example. At times, these ateliers were founded when Mughal painters who had left the court sought service at a Rajput court. While the Rajputs emulated the Mughal style in various aspects of their lives, they also rebelled against it. This was especially seen within portraiture. Painting realistic portraits of living people was a concept novel to the Hindu courts of Rajasthan as traditionally, portraiture among the Rajputs focused less on an individual's personality and more on the authority of the ruler. It was to them irrelevant to focus on the physical traits of a mortal being. The Mughal paintings incorporated Renaissance naturalism, and Rajput paintings turned towards more stylized modes.

Jharokha Portrait in the Mewar Ramayana

In what might be considered a deliberate yet subtle sign of rebellion, illustrations inspired by the *jharokha* portrait appear within the body of Rajput paintings. This paper aims to explore the form of the *jharokha* portrait employed within the Rajput painting tradition with respect to the Mewar Ramayana. While the relationship between the Maharanas of Mewar, also known as the Sisodias, and the Mughals was cordial, there was still a sense of rivalry lurking underneath this cordiality. The past was crucial to the Mewaris and it was employed to claim a sense of superiority. Several building projects were undertaken to rival certain Mughal monuments and illuminated manuscripts were commissioned to uphold their Sisodia lineage. One such manuscript was the Mewar Ramayana. It was commissioned in the 1650s by Maharana Jagat Singh. Between 1649 and 1653, Mahatma Hirananda copied the manuscript of the text in *nagari* script, and Sahib Din, Manohar, and other artists in the palace studio of the Ranas of Udaipur, Jagat Singh and Raj Singh, illuminated it. Sahib Din was the principal artist working at the Udaipur court studio in the 17th century. He was able to make Rajput painting into a sophisticated medium for the portrayal of Rajput society and aspirations by select and inventive borrowings from the type of popular art created in the Mughal capital.

Originally composed in seven volumes, each corresponding to a book of the epic Ramayana, the Mewar Ramayana was an enormous project and is said to have included 450 paintings. This epic is set in ancient times. However, the painters attempted to contemporize it through costume and architecture, updating them as per the fashion of the seventeenth century. This epic narrates the triumph of good over evil. It tells the story of the Hindu king Rama's triumph over the demon Ravana who kidnapped Rama's wife Sita. Losty suggested that the manuscript be read as a political allegory since Rama, an avatar of Vishnu, was a *suryavamshi*, hailing from a royal lineage that descended from the sun. The Sisodia kings of Mewar also claimed their descent from the sun, and therefore their descent from Rama. This allowed the royal family to claim the history of Lord Rama as their own, and to derive glory from such a history, just as the Mughals had done in turning towards Babur and his Timurid lineage. The paintings in the Mewar Ramayana have red and yellow borders and are in the horizontal format, bearing some semblance to the early paintings and texts on palm leaves. Blocks of bright solid colours such as red, blue and yellow are used as backgrounds to the different scenes within an illustration. Apart from this, colours such as ochres and olives are also used.

The form of the *jharokha* portrait used in the manuscript is worth looking into. A number of images depict Ravana at the *jharokha*.

(Book 6, Folio 155, recto from the Mewar Ramayana, digitally reunified by the British Library.

https://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=68b0d8eb-787f-4609-9028-8cd17ff05c96&type=book)

For instance, this image shows the ten-headed Ravana at the *jharokha* over which hangs a carpet. Just as a crowd gathers below to catch a glimpse of the emperor during the *jharokha darshana* and shower him with greetings, demons and men loyal to Ravana raise their hands as a mark of their respect for the king of Lanka. This image vividly shows the contrast between the heroes – Rama and Lakshmana, and the villains – Ravana and his followers. Good and evil, the two ends of the spectrum, get visually and spatially translated onto the page with evil occupying the right side of the page and good occupying the left side. Throughout the manuscript, as well as in this picture, Rama and Lakshmana have been shown in profile. The profile view was considered to be derogatory within the Persian painting tradition. However, the Mughal painters gradually employed and strictly reserved the profile view in portraiture to depict the emperor and his grandees. Profile prohibited reciprocity of gaze and helped in maintaining an imperial hierarchy visually. Other figures were painted in a side view while the three-quarter profile was used to represent the lower classes and rebels. Three-quarter and frontal views were often called *do-chasmi*, meaning two eyes within Rajasthani art. They were markers of foreignness as they were used by Persian and early Mughal painters. In her book, *The Intelligence of Tradition in Rajput Court Painting*, Molly Emma Aitken analyses a picture from the manuscript to suggest the foreignness of Ravana in one of the illustrations.

(Book 5, folio 2, recto from the Mewar Ramayana, digitally reunified by the British Library. https://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=68b0d8eb-787f-4609-9028-8cd17ff05c96&type=book)

In this image, Aitken suggests that the figure seated on the raised platform at the centre is Ravana, one of the only instances in the manuscript where he is not shown with multiple heads and hands. He is depicted in a three-quarter profile, thus emphasizing his foreignness. Furthermore, Aitken argues that his face bears much semblance to a portrait of Akbar. According to her, Hanuman views Lanka and sees an Akbar-like Ravana seated under a canopy in the manner of a Muslim ruler. The original ten-headed villain has thus been substituted by a remarkably Muslim figure. A look at the patterns on the raised platform upon which this figure is seated also reveals a Mughal influence as such platforms with ornamental designs were commonly found in Mughal paintings. However, a digitised version of the Mewar Ramayana available on the website of the British Library describes the scene as Hanuman observing the market of Lanka from above. The figure Aitken calls as Ravana who resembles Akbar is described as one of the keepers of peace. While the strikingly Mughal code of the image cannot be denied, it is unlikely that Ravana would be depicted without ten heads in this image alone and nowhere else in the manuscript. Aitken's analysis, nevertheless, is pertinent. In depicting the land of the villain of the epic in the manner of the land of the enemy of the Rajputs, there emerges a clear indication of the hostility of the Mewaris towards the Mughals. At the same time, a closer look at the text reveals a "mixed message" (Aitken 67). Lanka, albeit a foreign place, is described as a beautiful city of much splendour. Aitken remarks

To say that the [Mewari] court style was emblematic of resistance would not, then, be quite correct. In the context of a politically loaded manuscript such as the Ramayana, the style gave cultural definition to Mewar as distinct from the Mughals, but in a tone of respect for the enemy (Aitken 68).

There is indeed a subversion of the Mughal idiom in the paintings of the Mewar Ramayana, but this subversion is carried out in a manner that would not upset the enemy.

(Book 2, folio 3, recto from the Mewar Ramayana, digitally reunified by the British Library. https://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=68b0d8eb-787f-4609-9028-8cd17ff05c96&type=book)

While not all the *jharokhas* painted in the epic are shown with a carpet on the parapet, most *jharokha* windows are shown with carpets. In this scene from the Ramayana where Bharata is departing from the palace to visit his maternal grandfather accompanied by Shatrughna, one sees female figures peeping through the *jharokha* at the leftmost corner of the page. The scene that follows depicts the arrival of the princes at the maternal grandfather's place as the maternal grandfather, King of Kekeya, awaits Bharata.

(Book 2, folio 4, recto from the Mewar Ramayana, digitally reunified by the British Library. https://www.bl.uk/turning-

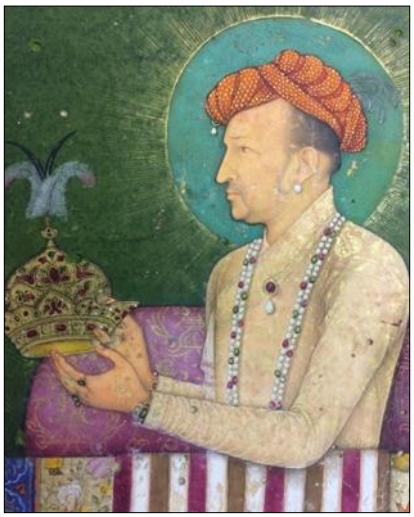
the-pages/?id=68b0d8eb-787f-4609-9028-8cd17ff05c96&type=book)

The carpet in the previous image is olive in colour with a red border. In this image, the carpet is blue in colour. Both the carpets are decorated with borders that have patterns painted on them. In attempting to provide designs to the border of the carpets, one sees a clear understanding among the Rajasthani court painters of the rich textile that was portrayed in Mughal paintings. In her article *A Knowing Look: Appropriation and Subversion of the Mughal Idiom in Rajput Paintings of the Eighteenth Century*, Kavita Singh suggests in paintings, it seems that the visual codes that betokened the emperor as a divine king – his halo, his being seated upon a golden throne, his being framed by a jharokha window – were restricted to the sovereign, and their adoption by others…was itself a sign of rebellion (171).

The *jharokha* images of the king of Kekeya and King Dashratha suggest that it was not just Ravana who was portrayed in this manner. This shows that while there is more possibility of the *jharokha* portrait type being deliberately employed to depict the villain of the epic, Ravana, and therefore to serve as a visual commentary on the vices of the Mughal rulers, the *jharokha* in itself might have been an element of curiosity for the Rajput court artists wherein the ways in which the *jharokha* could be used was being experimented with. Inadvertently, this experimentation serves to subvert the entire iconography of a *jharokha* portrait in myriad ways. Furthermore, characters not central to the narrative also appear at the *jharoka* in the later volumes.

(Book 6, folio 6, recto from the Mewar Ramayana, digitally reunified by the British Library. https://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=68b0d8eb-787f-4609-9028-8cd17ff05c96&type=book)

This image forms a part of a larger scene. It depicts a minor character whose clothes signify that he belongs to the nobility. He plays no active role in the narrative and remains a mere spectator. One can assume that the model that the Mewari painters were using for this image was a portrait of Jahangir at the *jharokha* throne, holding a Timurid crown, or such similar images.



(Emperor Jahangir holding a ceremonial crown. Ink, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, circa 1620; Sheet: 32.5 × 18 cm; 11.2 × 7.5 cm; British Museum)

Like Jahangir, the figure from the Mewar Ramayana is shown resting his arm on the parapet, with his elbow slightly protruding out. Mewari illustrations lacked depth and the figures were often two-dimensional. Painters at Rajasthani courts were hesitant in emulating the naturalistic components of the Mughal art to epic and poetic subjects. Scholars opine that while the portrait may have embraced Mughal innovations at a later stage, this is not the case with narrative illustrations. However, here one sees an attempt by the painters of Mewar court to move towards three-dimensionality as indicated by the slightly protruding elbow. Not just kings, but also servants such as Manthara, are painted in the manner of the *jharokha* portrait. By depriving the *jharokha* of an imperial presence, which architecturally and metaphorically functions to place an emperor high above his subjects, subversion takes place. This subversion, however, is fully achieved by means of empty *jharokhas*. The manuscript abounds in *jharokhas* with carpets on the parapets that are devoid of human figures. By emptying the image of an imperial, or even human presence, the painters of Mewar strip the *jharokha* portrait of its grandeur and its meaning.

(Book 6, folio 7, recto from the Mewar Ramayana, digitally reunified by the British Library. https://www.bl.uk/turning-the-pages/?id=68b0d8eb-787f-4609-9028-8cd17ff05c96&type=book)

Conclusion

Portraiture is a way of validating and looking at the individual. Portraits were important agents in projecting the religious, social and political identities of the members of a

royal court. Within the Mughal empire, portraiture arose at a time when there was an increased emphasis on asserting one's dynastic lineage and past glory. For the Mughals, it was their Timurid lineage while for the Rajputs, it was about the tracing of their line of descent to the sun, the moon and even the gods. In a period wherein political relationships were unstable and there was grave uncertainty regarding dynastic succession, portraiture thus became a means to "assert current legitimacy and age-old authority" (Branfoot 18).

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