

Symbolism and Aesthetics: Analyzing Mughal Motifs in Art and Architecture

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Abstract

Spanning from 16th to 18th of imperial rule in the Indian subcontinent, the Mughal Empire is an indelible mark on artistic expression through its meticulous cultivation of motifs in various mediums, including art, architecture, manuscript illumination, textiles and decorative arts. This paper examined the symbolism reflected in the Mughal art and architecture. Through a multidisciplinary approach drawing from art history, cultural studies and material culture analysis, this study examined the diverse typologies of Mughal motifs, which included the study of flora and fauna imagery on Mughal monuments, illustrated manuscripts, textile and costumes. By analyzing their aesthetic qualities, symbolic meanings attributed to floral motifs and historical contexts, this research seeks to unravel the complex layers of cultural synthesis and exchange that characterize Mughal art. Through a comprehensive exploration of primary sources, scholarly literature and visual analysis, this paper examined the motifs in shaping the artistic identities, cultural narratives and aesthetic sensibilities in the Mughal Empire and beyond.

Keywords: Mughals, flora and fauna, aesthetics, *pietra-dura*, art and culture

Introduction

The intricate motifs adorning the artistic creations of the Mughal Empire stand as enduring testaments to the dynasty's rich cultural tapestry and artistic refinement. Spanning over two centuries of rule across the Indian subcontinent, the

Mughal emperors meticulously cultivated a visual language that melded diverse influences from Persia, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. Mughals established one of the greatest empires in the region of South. They achieved a high level of artistic and intellectual sophistication and created magnificent art pieces. Mughals constructed monumental buildings with surface decorations and showed their interest in a vast variety of painting, illustrated manuscripts and decorative arts. Symbolism reflected in their all fields of art and architecture. Flora and fauna is one of the favorite theme which depicted by numerous artists of Mughal courts. Mughal artists used plants, birds and animals imagery to illustrate on the artwork which includes royal costumes, manuscripts of Mughal emperors, paintings and variety of ornamental arts. Mughal art emphasized on the development of motif design in a variety of floral and geometric designs attributed with Mughal court artists. Mughal miniatures developed under the reign of Mughal emperors portrayed scenes of royal court ceremonies, war scenes and portraits of emperors.

Depictions of flora and fauna remained a significant aspect of Mughal art and culture after Babur. The second Mughal emperor, Humayun (r. 1530-40; 55-56), showed his interest in paintings. Humayun's fascination and joy in the natural world, as noted by his servant Jouher, during a specific event in 1543, when an exceptionally stunning bird was caught and the emperor requested a portrait of it to be created. Artworks created during the third period of Mughal rule, under Emperor Akbar (1556-1605), are particularly rich in detailed portrayals of flowers in full bloom and a variety of birds and woodland creatures set against lush green backgrounds, with intricate depictions of trees. The vessels used in the *Hamzanama* typically retain the traditional shapes of earlier Islamic metal and glassware, with limited representations of flowers and sometimes animal heads used as decorative elements. The hilts of daggers and swords also show little to no flower designs, as most of these weapons seem to come from Turkish or Persian backgrounds, drawing from a

different artistic tradition. On the other hand, armor, shields, and quivers often showcase floral designs in Arabic arabesque patterns. Yet, figures such as Babur, Humayun, and Akbar are all noted for their deep fascination with Mughal gardens and flowers. One of Babur's first projects in India was the creation of a garden known as *Charh bagh*. This suggests that the natural world offered themes that were both non-controversial and easily stylized.

During the period of Jahangir's rule (1605-27), the Mughal decorative arts reached their peak, evolving into a sophisticated style of artistic expression characterized by a rich use of flora and fauna. Jahangir was lover of beauty. During Jahangir's reign, there was a shift towards more realistic and vibrant themes inspired by nature, including plants and animals. Studies into flowers became more detailed, and fresh customs developed from the blending of European traditions. A collection of jade items, marked with inscriptions and dates, showcases the evolution of the Jahangiri style from its influences from Timurid and Safavid arts to its distinctively Mughal style, prominently featuring floral motifs. During the reign of the Mughal emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan, the era was marked by the creation of some of the most splendid art, architecture, and craft, all heavily influenced by the use of floral designs. As was typical with imperial art, the decorative arts continued to be influenced by the reign of Aurangzeb (1658-1707) and subsequent Mughal emperors, who often replicated the styles established by Shahjahan. In fact, many of the same artisans likely worked during this period, as the early works produced under Aurangzeb closely resemble those made by Shahjahan. However, as the political climate under Aurangzeb became more unstable, with his court's workshops falling apart and artists moving to places like Kangra and Rajasthan, the prominence of floral designs in art and craft began to wane. While Shahjahan made his contributions more towards in the development of Mughal grand monuments like Taj Mahal which is one of the marvelous example of Mughal architecture. Shah Jahan continued to incorporate floral motifs, especially in architectural design.

Yet, the influence of floral motifs persisted in Indian art and craft well after the fall of the Mughal Empire, to this day (Markel, S. 1999).

Analysis of Mughal Motifs in Art and Architecture

The Mughals held a deep reverence for nature, and one method they employed to incorporate the beauty of the exterior into their homes was through the creation of floral motifs. During the era of the Mughals, there were various fundamental applications of flora and fauna imagery in their art, which represented in various forms. Depiction of flowers reflected in Mughal miniatures and in architecture represented in *pietra-dura* and murals. One of the marvelous example of flower imagery is depicted in Taj Mahal's in the technique of *pietra-dura* also known as marble inlay. Pietra-dura, linked to the Mughal era, is distinguished by its vibrant, nuanced, and detailed patterns achieved through the process of inlaying valuable and semi-valuable stones, gems, or even shells; typically on a white marble foundation that features intricate floral, geometric or arabesque designs. The most renowned materials for inlaying in *pietra-dura* include coral, pearl, cornelian, jasper, lapis lazuli, onyx, and topaz, with white marble being the most common base. A broad selection of flower varieties is incorporated into both the exterior and interior of these pieces, often set against a backdrop of colored stones. Wide variety of flower species are embedded on the exterior and interior in a colored stones depicted in multicolor (Fig.1).



Fig 1. Flower varieties in marble inlay at Taj Mahal

In the case of Itimad al-Daula's tomb at Agra, floral designs are depicted in the form of bulbous vases containing a variety of flowers on its surface ornamentation (Fig 2). Vases are depicted on the dado wall of the tomb chamber at the Taj Mahal (Fig 3), where it is intricately carved into marble. These vases draw inspiration from European Collaert's vase technique. In this instance, the flowers differ from the standard example, they are arranged as stylized sprays in mirror symmetry around the central iris (Kumari, 2019).

Mughal floral art is often characterized by detailed illustrations of branches, leaves, blossoms, and buds, arranged in various patterns that represented the principles of naturalistic art and its aesthetics. The backgrounds are simple, with sense of perspective defining the horizontal lines. Mughal artists frequently include birds, butterflies, and other insects flying over the flowers in order to create rhythm of movement and creates compositional aspects. This technique is used to enhance the realism of the setting by creating a relationship between the main subject and other

smaller elements of nature. Additionally, artists have introduced the concept of these hovering elements, giving the impression of freedom within the space surrounding the still-life depiction of the main subject. These artworks display a naturalistic approach, with certain details, such as the floating butterflies, possibly influenced by European botanical illustrations.

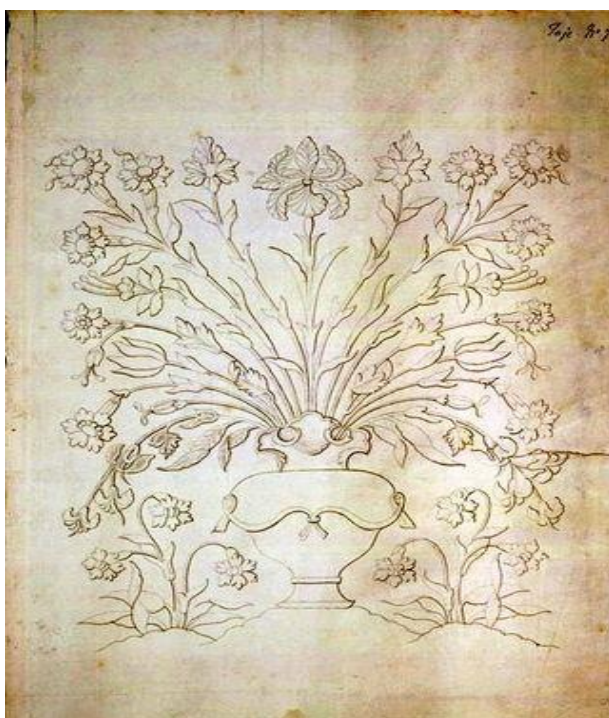


Fig 2: Vase of narcissi with covered cups at Tomb of Itimad al-Daula, Agra, 1622.



Fig 3. Vase of flowers in marble relief on the dado of the Taj Mahal, 1810-15.

Botanical studies has been made by Mughal court painters where creative depiction of flowers are portrayed against bright background. Mansur, a renowned painter of flora and fauna in Jahangir's court, his depiction of lilies displays a haphazard grouping of flowers in contrast to the refined beauty found in the Dara Shikoh album. Nonetheless, the composition of various lily species, all from the same species, is indeed influenced by European botanical catalogs, which focus more on the science of plants rather than their visual appeal. Abu'l Hasan, along with numerous other artists from the Mughal court, often reworked or replicated European prints of Christian religious scenes to refine their technique in depicting the play of light and shadow, thus Mansur is reproducing a European print to guide him towards a more realistic portrayal of flowers (figs 4-5). On the other hand, Muhammad Khan's artwork appears

to have been inspired by a European model, as seen in several illustrated botanical catalogs from the late 16th to early 17th centuries (fig 6). His floral studies influenced from European artistic techniques mentioned in a book attributed to Dara Shikoh, the son of Emperor Jahangir (Kumari, 2019).

One exquisite example is a collection of naturalistic flower studies, where six different flower species are depicted against rich yellow background. This composition appears to be inspired from the earlier artwork by Mansur, who depicted the blossoms of Kashmir in his album dated 1621 C.E. The vibrant yellow background and the variety of flower species are arranged in a visually pleasing manner. The bright background effectively illuminates the entire plant, making the flowers stand out more prominently. Additionally, it simplifies the task of arranging the sky, which would typically require careful attention to spacing if done manually. It's worth observing that the arrangement of the leaves is intentional and well-thought-out: the lower leaves are more tightly packed, indicating the plant's connection to the ground; as the leaves grow upwards, they become more spread out, balanced by a bud, and finally, the emphasis shifts to the flowers, which feature petals that unfold in different ways, each at a different stage of blooming. So, Mughal painters aims to portrayal of naturalistic approach.



Fig 4: Lilies signed by Mansur Jahangir, 1605



Fig. 5: Lilies, from Adriaen Collaert's Florilegium, Antwerp, 1590

Similarly, in textiles Mughals incorporate their study of flora and fauna with rich and vibrant colors. Mughal rugs (fig 7) and fabrics are incredibly vivid and deeply layered in color, rivaling the craftsmanship of Safavid counterparts. A testament to the skill of Iranian Seljuk's silk velvet, the 16th century "Khusru and Shirine" painting features a central figure, Nizami's Khusrau, with a composition filled with intricate scrolls, leafy structures, blooms, and galloping horses. Conversely, Safavid carpets from the same era showcase borders adorned with floral motifs, and the focal areas are inspired by wild animals and lush natural scenes. The scene around birds perched on branches and diverse wild creatures like lion, tiger, crocodile, deer, and antelope are bathed in vibrant, detailed plant life, all against a vivid, richly colored red ground (Bagai, S. & Yadav, N 2024).



Fig 6: Flower studies attributed to Muhammad Khan, 1630-33.



Fig.7: Mughal Carpet with flora and fauna dated 16th Century, collection Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna.

The riding coat from the Mughal era stands out as an exceptional showcase of Mughal designs inspired by nature, including both flora and fauna. The attire of the elite, including generals, monarchs, and members of the court, featured intricate illustrations of humans, animals, birds, and flowers, as well as elaborate vines, vegetation, and scenes from battles and celebrations. Certain textiles showcased detailed imagery of hunting scenes, including deer, horses, and figures adorned with stylized floral patterns. The Mughal riding coat, dating back to the early 17th century, is a prime example of the period's distinctive fabric designs, characterized by embroidery and the use of gem-like details with vibrant silk threads on satin. The craftsmanship of these designs can be traced back to the Timurid period. The coat's design includes elements such as flying swans, butterflies, rabbits, tigers, and various flowers, along with a variety of bushes and scrolls, creating a rich and harmonious

composition. There was a surge in the creation of paintings and murals, reflecting the art style of the Timurid period. Fabrics from Akbar's time are known for their depictions of flower buds and straight leaves and stems, while Jahangir's era is marked by fully bloomed flowers with delicate and flexible stems, featuring curved and twisted leaves. Costumes adorned with floral motifs were often embellished with gold and silver threads, with realistic portrayals of paisley, lotuses, poppies, and various flowers, as well as stylized grids of single blossoms and leaves. The inclusion of naturalistic flowering plants, along with a variety of fruit trees depicted in a stylized yet realistic manner against a plain background, contributes to balanced compositions, adding a modern, stylish element to contemporary designs (Nasim, 2019).



Fig 8: Hunting Jacket of Mughal's period with detail close-up of the motives.

Symbolism and Aesthetics

Symbolism is reflected in Mughal art and architecture and flora and fauna is the preference of Mughal artists. Flowers symbolize life's vibrancy, allure, and its transient nature. The Mughals sought to cultivate an environment that was aesthetically pleasing and spiritually enriching by

integrating them into their artwork. The motifs are arranged within clusters of flowers and leaves in patterns that repeat along the vertical and horizontal axes. The symmetrical patterns, frequently repeated in mirror reverse, are used to arrange various graphical images in Mughal art. Among the myriad motifs that adorned their architectural marvels, manuscripts, textiles, and courtly artifacts, the floral motifs held a paramount position. Embodying themes of life, regeneration, and abundance, floral patterns became synonymous with Mughal aesthetics, adorning everything from the delicate pages of illuminated manuscripts to the grand facades of imperial structures like the Taj Mahal.

Flowers were significant in Mughal culture in several symbolic situations. For instance, in Persian and Islamic cultures, the rose was connected to love and beauty, whereas in Hinduism, the lotus flower stood for purity and enlightenment. It is possible that the Mughals were honoring nature and expressing their cultural and religious values by placing floral designs. Mughal court painters represented botanical studies of numerous species of flowers in their albums which are attributed with Mughal emperors and their artists. Alongside floral designs, geometric motifs, including intricate arabesques and interlacing patterns, reflected the empire's cosmopolitan ethos and mathematical sophistication, echoing the geometric precision of Islamic art while infusing it with Mughal sensibilities. Animal motifs, ranging from the majestic lion to the graceful peacock, added a symbolic layer to Mughal art, symbolizing power, beauty, and divine grace. The aesthetic was characterized by naturalistic flowers with birds and animals either arranged in rows or shown against plain background. Through their patronage and refinement of these motifs, the Mughal emperors not only embellished their realm with unparalleled beauty but also crafted a visual legacy that continues to inspire and captivate audiences worldwide.

Conclusion

The rich tapestry of Mughal motifs encapsulates the empire's unparalleled artistic legacy and cultural synthesis. Through the meticulous cultivation of floral and animal motifs, the Mughal emperors forged a visual language that transcended temporal and geographical boundaries, reflecting the dynasty's cosmopolitan ethos and refined aesthetic sensibilities. These motifs, imbued with layers of symbolism and historical significance, adorned not only architectural marvels and royal artifacts but also permeated the fabric of everyday life, shaping the artistic identity of the Indian subcontinent for centuries to come. Furthermore, the enduring legacy of Mughal motifs extends beyond their historical context, inspiring contemporary artists and designers to reinterpret and reinvent these age-old symbols in innovative ways. The intricacies of Mughal art and culture, the enduring allure of their motifs serves as a poignant reminder of the empire's enduring impact on the world of art and aesthetics.

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