



The Indian Portrait 1560–1860

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Portraiture at the Mughal Court

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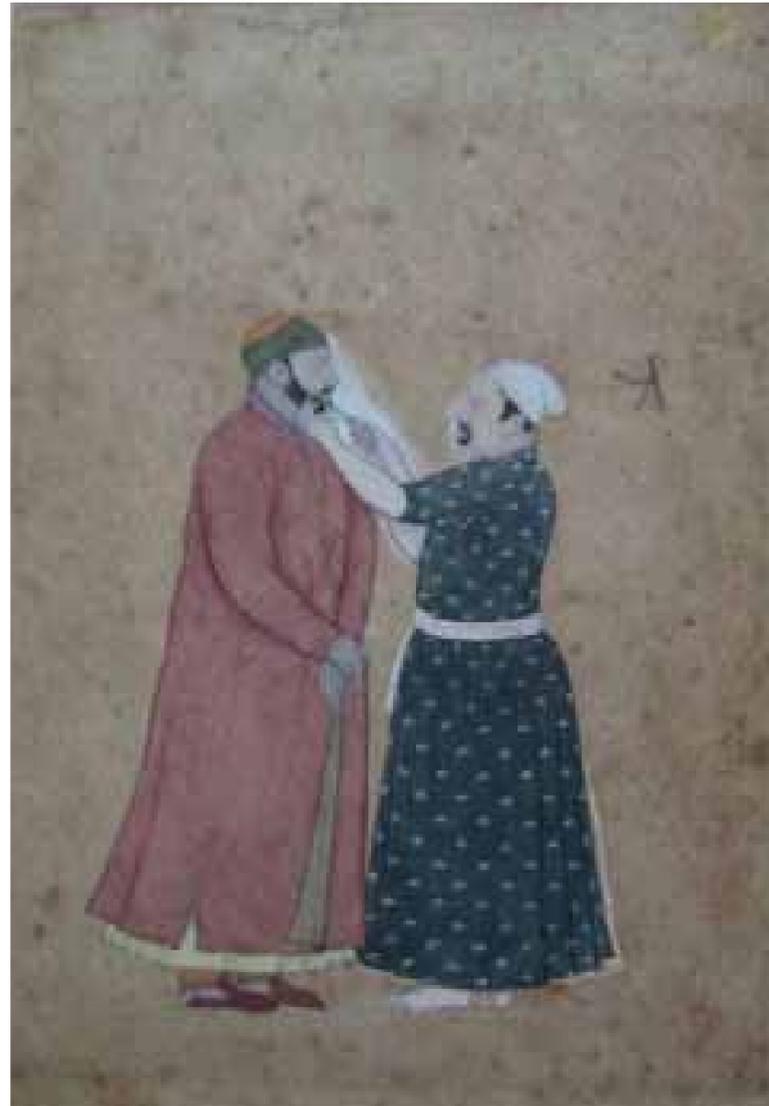
In the late sixteenth century, a radical innovation in Mughal court painting was recorded by the historian of the Emperor Akbar's reign. Abu'l Fazl wrote his magisterial chronicle the *Akbarnama* between 1589 and 1596. Its third volume, entitled the *A'in-i Akbari* ('Akbarian Ceremonial'), described various court institutions, including the *tasvir khana*, or atelier of figural painting. Here, the historian mentions the excellence of the royal artists at producing the likenesses of prominent individuals. Due to the Emperor's encouragement, Abu'l Fazl reported, the 'magical art' of *tasvir*, or 'painting figures', had gained in beauty.' By order of Akbar himself, 'portraits [*surat*] have been painted of all His Majesty's servants, and a huge book [*kitab*] has been made.'²

Abu'l Fazl measured the royal artists' work against two standards: 'the world-renowned unique art of Behzad and the magic-making of the Europeans [*farangi*, or Franks]'.³ Kamal al-Din Behzad was the supreme artist of the Timurid and Safavid courts: he became director of the royal library under Shah Tahmasp of Iran in 1522; his name was famous across the Persian-speaking world to which the Mughals belonged, and his paintings were collected in courtly and aristocratic circles. European art, on the other hand, was a relatively recent arrival at the court, and at this period was predominantly Christian in subject.

The background of most members of the *tasvir khana*, Hindus and Muslims from the Indian subcontinent, is not mentioned, but their training would have drawn on entirely different conceptual and representational traditions from those of the West, or of Iran.⁴ Most of them probably entered royal service after the defeat of their former patrons, rulers who usually became part of the Mughal administration; others were perhaps drawn to the court by the lure of an emperor

Opposite: Detail from Barbur laying out the Garden of Fidelity (Pl. 6).

Fig. 2. Balwant Singh of Jasrota having his beard trimmed. Jasrota, by Nainsukh, c.1755–1760. Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaja Vastu Sangrahalaya (formerly Prince of Wales Museum), Mumbai, no. 33.110.



work which may have found their way to the hills. Nainsukh produced much of his finest work under the patronage of Raja Balwant Singh of the small state of Jasrota (pl. 47) and other local nobles. Nainsukh was one of the few artists of any Rajput court to apply his extraordinary skills of both perception and execution to portraits of ordinary people as well as rulers: his study of the holy man Raghunath Pathania (pl. 48) is as beautiful and insightful a portrait as those of his princely patron. Nainsukh was also one of the few Indian artists of whom we have a self-portrait, seen in the painting in which he discusses a painting with Raja Balwant Singh (pl. 47).

Balwant Singh in the hills and Amar Singh in Rajasthan were unusual at that time in that portraits were produced showing them in informal situations rather than only in conventional courtly settings. Exceptionally intimate are

Fig. 3. Maharaja Siddh Sen of Mandi as a manifestation of Shiva. Mandi, c.1725. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, no. 2001.137.



the portraits by Nainsukh of Balwant Singh having his beard trimmed, writing a letter, or strolling alone on the battlements of his palace (fig. 2).⁶ Artists working for other remarkable patrons also attempted to reveal something of their subjects' personality as well as their outward appearance. Notable among these are the formidable Raja Siddh Sen of Mandi (pl. 44, fig. 3)⁷ and his eccentric son Shamsheer Sen in the hills (pl. 45), and Maharana Bhim Singh of Mewar in Rajasthan, whose court artist Chokha shows him tying his turban or being led to bed after over-indulging in drink as well as in more formal situations.⁸ Some rulers liked to make allusions through their portraits to their supposed special relationship with certain Hindu deities: Maharaja Sawant Singh of Kishangarh (r. 1748–1764) commissioned many stylised images of himself and his mistress