

## A Mughal Drawing of the Nativity

By Samantha Rhodes

In our digital age, there is at times a tendency to think that throughout history people living in different parts of the world had comparatively minimal contact with one another and, thus, developed distinctive and singularly individual cultures with little influence from “outside” sources. This notion, however, quickly unravels when one considers, for example, the flourishing of global trade and communication during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some curious objects today found in the Free Library’s collection reflect this period of heightened global exchange, as they seem to be copies of European prints that were produced in South Asia.

*The Drawing of the Blessed Virgin or Drawing of the Nativity of Mary* [Fig.1] is just one example of an image originating from the Mughal court that mimicks formal elements often found in European prints. Yet we must ask ourselves how such items came to be and for who’s viewership? What kind of global communication produced such an item, particularly when considering Christian iconography in an Islamic context? As viewers, we should investigate if such images are simply copies or encompass broader concerns of artistic agency.

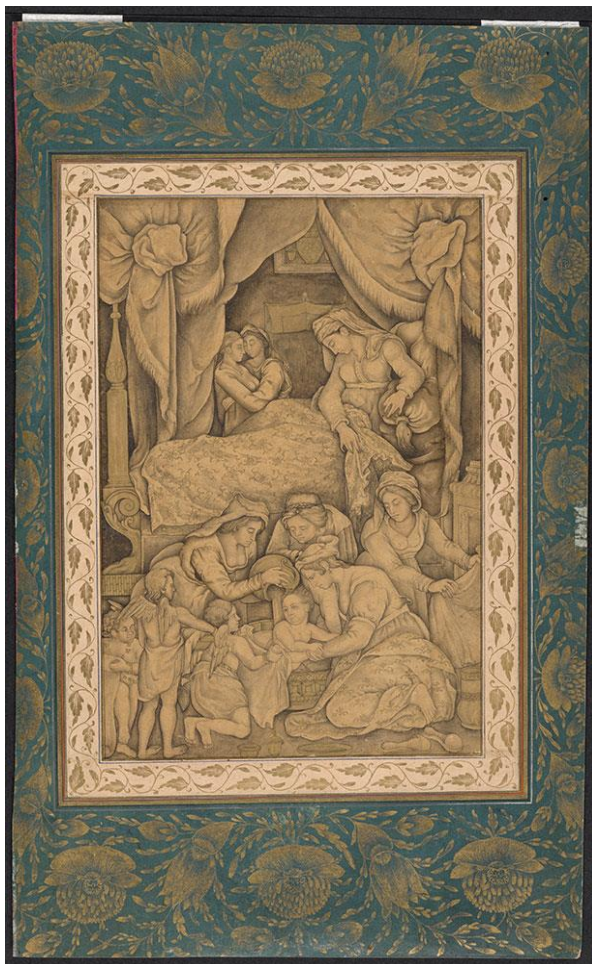


Figure 1. *Drawing of the Blessed Virgin or Drawing of the Nativity of Mary*, early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Free Library, Philadelphia, Lewis M 93.

An excellent example of a potential source that South Asian artists were studying is a print by Agostino Carracci [Fig. 2]. The print displays a similar interior scene as the Mughal drawing, except the composition has been arranged in reverse. There are similar elements, such as pottery wares and costuming. Obviously, Mughal artists were studying European compositions when creating this painting.

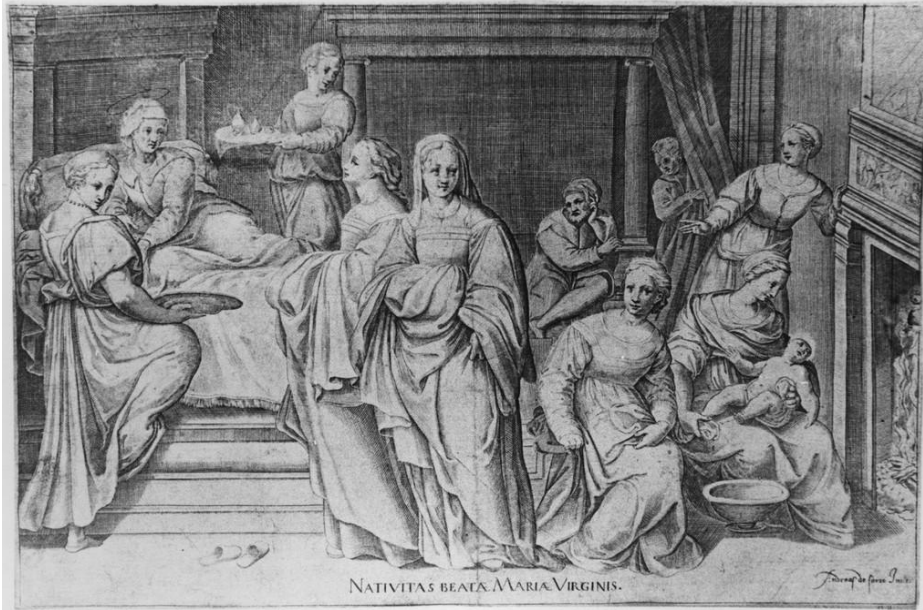


Figure 2. Agostino Carracci, *The Birth of the Virgin*, c. 1514. (Source: Artstor)

*The Drawing of the Blessed Virgin* is composed similarly to the Italian print. Mary's mother, Agatha, lies atop an elaborate bed within an interior surrounded by female figures or attendants. In the foreground a woman holds the newly born Mary. Within the Mughal composition there are angelic figures in attendance, alluding to the supernatural status of Mary, and her future role as Jesus Christ's mother. It was common in the Italian Renaissance to situate historical Christian figures within an Italian cultural context, such as an interior room and modern costuming. The Mughal artist, as well, has placed the narrative scene within the same European context, rather than a true historical depiction, further suggesting Mughal artists were looking to European prints for inspiration and practice.

The drawing combines elements from Persianate, Indian, and European styles. Although the print contains similarities specific to European works, note the stylistic differences. The most prominent aspect is the elaborately painted border surrounding the image. Symbolically, this places even this European "copy" within the context of a [Mughal](#) manuscript and larger Persianate tradition. The amount of gold paint, as well, may strike the viewer. Gilding is found not only in the [illumination](#) of the border but also on the bed, pottery wares, jewelry, and the open curtain rolled atop the door frame. This was likely a luxury manuscript production. The figures themselves are ambiguous due to their lack of spiritual accoutrements, such as haloes, crowns, or elements from biblical stories. Ambiguity in the Mughal context functions differently than European studies. Each image was meant to be relatable and legible for its viewers. In a

European, Christian context, birthing scenes demonstrated either the birth of the Virgin or the birth of Christ. Within the Mughal context, the ambiguity of the figures extends farther, as diverse individuals could relate to more general motifs of birthing and motherhood rather than the religious figures themselves. Christian iconography was repurposed to a formal, relatable study rather than a specific religious meditation on holy figures.

The use of European, Christian figures, however, was propagandistic, as it connected Mughal emperors with spiritual authority. We see a similar theme in the Free Library's Mughal painting of *The Holy Family* [Fig 3]. Joseph, Mary, and the Christ child are without supernatural accoutrements such as haloes, and nearly divorced from the biblical narrative. However, because they are taken from a European context, they symbolize a dualistic interpretation of both imperial and religious thought.<sup>1</sup> Thus, this image was part of a larger central Asian tradition of projecting multi-faceted imperial identities.<sup>2</sup>

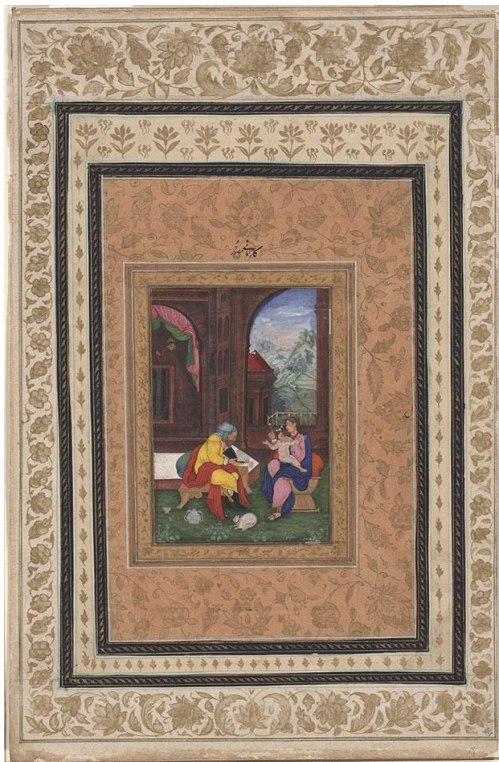


Figure 3. *The Holy Family*. c. 1625. Free Library, Philadelphia, Lewis M 70.

These paintings from the Free Library were created within the context of the Mughal emperor Jahangir's court. The emperor in many ways was continuing the legacy of his father [Akbar](#), who's enthusiasm for knowledge and patronage witnessed a flourishing of art and cultural production fueled by international communication in the later sixteenth century. The same

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<sup>1</sup> Ebba Koch. *The Influence of the Jesuit Missions*. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Minissale, *Mughal Occidentalism, Artistic Encounters between Europe and Asia at the Courts of India, 1580-1630*, 67.

artistic interest extended to his son, Jahangir, and rulers after him.<sup>3</sup> The presence of [Jesuit missionaries](#), invited by Akbar himself, was impactful within philosophical and religious debates coordinated by the emperor and influential in the artistic language of the Mughal court and artist workshops. The Jesuits used imagery to explain to Akbar and those at court the Christian religion, and in particular made use of European Renaissance and Baroque prints, as they were easily portable.<sup>4</sup> The Jesuits arrived for their first mission in 1580, bringing the [Royal Polyglot Bible](#) [Fig. 4], replete with religious imagery, with them.<sup>5</sup> Christian imagery, thus, held a significant presence in the Mughal court because of Akbar's interest in both art and religion; however, Christian imagery was much more of a success than Christianity itself in sixteenth-century India.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 4. Pieter van der Borcht, *Pietatis Concordiae* or The peace among animals under the rule of the Messiah, first title page of volume I of the *Royal Polyglot Bible*, published in Antwerp by C. Plantin, 1568-72, British Library, London. (Source: Artstor)

The Mughal Empire was a young dynasty that sought to legitimize their rule amidst diverse peoples.<sup>7</sup> Though Akbar and his court were Muslim, most people practiced Hinduism and Buddhism. The arts became a means of emphasizing Akbar's ruling status, and his superiority

<sup>3</sup> Susan Stronge. *Painting For the Mughal Emperor: The Art of the Book 1560-1660*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Bailey, *The Truth Showing Mirror*, 381.

<sup>5</sup> Ebba Koch. *The Influence of the Jesuit Missions on Symbolic Representations of the Mughal Emperors*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *A Roomful of Mirrors: The Artful Embrace of the Mughals and the Franks, 1550-1700*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Ebba Koch. *Pietre Dure and Other Artistic Affinities between the Court of the Mughals and That of the Medici*. 30.

over foreign rulers.<sup>8</sup> Thus, when Jesuit missionaries brought European prints, boasting of the earthly and heavenly authority of Christ, Akbar realized the potential of their presentation as a means to an end. Akbar encouraged the viewing of Christian holy figures as an expression of his sovereign, divine rule that extended globally, not just to the Mughal Empire. Historians have given more credence to Jesuit accounts of the court that center around Akbar's conversion when in reality, there were significant changes made to Christian iconography meant to reflect Mughal culture.<sup>9</sup> Jesuits interpreted these iconographic changes as a failure on the part of the Mughals to replicate religious imagery, but this further supports an understanding that these Mughal paintings were artistic studies rather than copies.<sup>10</sup> This is affirmed by another image in the Free Library's collection title *The Burial of Christ* [Fig. 5].

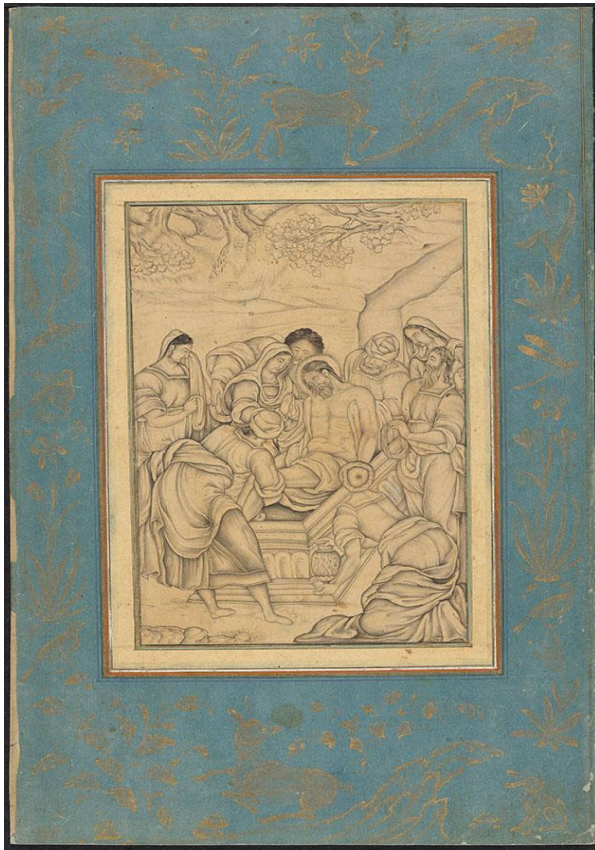


Figure 5. *Drawing of the Burial of Christ*, early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Free Library, Philadelphia, Lewis M 92.

This Mughal painting again employs a Christian narrative but instead provides an interesting case study on behalf of the Mughal artist concerning formal similarities with [Islamic calligraphy](#).<sup>11</sup> Calligraphy and European prints were similar in medium, as both involved thick, black lines to create visual interest, alongside both being rendered on the page. Image, text, and their readability within a manuscript function as an immersive experience. Thus, Mughal artists

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<sup>8</sup> Koch, *Pietre Dure*, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Minissale, *Mughal Occidentalism*, 56.

<sup>10</sup> Minissale, *Mughal Occidentalism*, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Yael Rice, *Lines of Perception: European Prints and the Mughal Kitabkhana*, 202.

employ a monochromatic print to link it conceptually with calligraphy, providing a rich, visual experience for the viewer.

Though these images in the Free Library's collection have been historically considered "European copies," they function more as independent studies reflecting Mughal agency and experimentation with outside sources of art. This experimentation encouraged artistic development and solidified a young dynasty amidst diverse groups of people. Historians have traditionally situated Mughal interest in European art forms as one of inspiration and awe. Still, this brief study reminds us that, though there was European presence, Mughal artists and patrons worked independently, rendering Christian iconography, imagery, and style within their cultural contexts. Doing this had a later impact on European artists as well. The cross-cultural communication came full circle with the Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn, who was an avid collector in general but took an interest in Islamic, and specifically, Mughal manuscripts.<sup>12</sup> Rembrandt employed the same technique as Mughal artists had done previously, using foreign imagery as inspiration and study for his own works [Fig. 6 & 7].

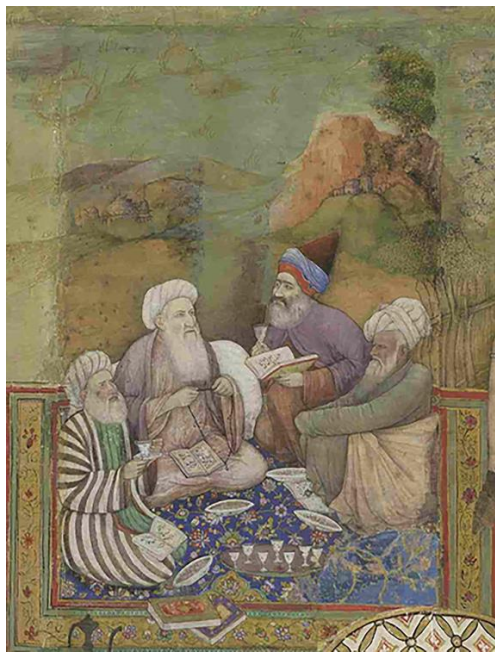


Figure 6. Unknown Indian (Mughal) and Viennese artists, *Four Mullahs*, 1627-28. (Source: Artstor)

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<sup>12</sup> Catherine Glynn. "Mughal Masterworks in Rembrandt's Hand." *Rembrandt and the Inspiration of India*, 29.



Figure 7. Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, *Four Mullahs Seated under a Tree* (Sheikh Husain Jami, Sheikh Ajmeri, Sheikh Muhammad Mazandarani, and Sheikh Miyan Mir), ca. 1656-61. (Source: Artstor)

Rembrandt employs a similar composition for his print showing four mullahs, except he has placed the figures amidst a European style landscape, employing atmospheric perspective and centering the figures around a tree. Although the four mullahs featured in the Mughal painting display dimensionality, Rembrandt employs loose etchings to give the figures shape, divorcing them from their ornamental exterior. Rembrandt's interest in Eastern representation extended to his religious prints as well, seen in his image, *Abraham Entertaining the Three Angels* [Fig. 8]. His use of Muslim figures as a basis for Christian imagery provides a layered theological approach when viewing his work. Rembrandt could have been using Mughal prints for historical context as biblical characters originate from Eastern lands rather than Europe, or he could have theologically referenced the Christian gospel as extending to all nations, not just European ones.



Figure 8. Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, *Abraham Entertaining the Three Angels*, 1656. (Source: Artstor)

Whatever Rembrandt's purpose, it should be noted that global communication was present long before our twenty-first century digital age, and no culture fully developed without outside sources of inspiration and study.



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