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## *Behind the Scenes: the Bodleian Library's Mughal paintings of 'Love and Devotion'*

HOW DID A SMALL but significant collection of paintings from Mughal India come to be in the Bodleian Library in Oxford? How did they support the theme and purpose of the 2012 State Library of Victoria exhibition *Love and Devotion: from Persia and beyond*, as well as the accompanying *Love and Devotion: Persian cultural crossroads* conference held in Melbourne in April 2012? The intention in this article is to give an overview of the collection of Mughal paintings held by the Bodleian Library, how they came to be in Oxford, and to link the collection with the three particular bound Mughal manuscripts that were included in the Melbourne exhibition, giving further background information about them.

### **The Collectors and Donors**

Based on earlier libraries at Oxford, the Bodleian Library was refounded by Sir Thomas Bodley (1545-1613), a wealthy former English diplomat, and reopened in 1602 as the Library for the University of Oxford. From the beginning, Thomas Bodley sought benefactions and arranged for agents to buy books for the Library across Europe and beyond.<sup>1</sup> Thus he created an environment that would welcome material of all kinds and in all languages, and the foundations were laid for the collection to expand and embrace materials from Asia.

The first album of Mughal paintings to come to the Bodleian was donated by the University of Oxford's then Chancellor, the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud (1573-1645). In February 1634, a letter to the Levant, or Turkey, Company required that as the King has

considered that there is a great deal of learning fit to be known written in Arabic, and great scarcity of Arabic and Persian books in this country, wherefore . . . every ship . . . at every voyage shall bring home one Arabic or Persian manuscript book, to be delivered to the master of the company, and by him to the Archbishop of Canterbury, who shall dispose of them as the King shall think fit, provided that the books so to be brought be any other than Alkarons, because there is great choice of them here already.<sup>2</sup>

Thus by this means the volume arrived in Oxford in 1640, only 30 years after it is thought to have been created in around 1610.<sup>3</sup> It contained one of the earliest sets of *Ragamala* pictures to reach Europe (there are eighteen such paintings in the album, as well as twelve other non-*Ragamala* paintings, and nearly 100 panels of calligraphy) and is known today as the 'Laud *Ragamala*'. *Ragamala* paintings illustrate the mood and sentiment behind the traditional Indian musical modes, or ragas. Incidentally it is just one of more than 1,200 manuscripts presented to the Bodleian by Laud and the only Mughal one. Laud

was later imprisoned for treason, and executed in the Tower of London in 1645.

Nearly 200 years passed before the next episode in this story, when the Bodleian's collection of Mughal paintings was expanded in the short space of 25 years by bequest, gift and purchase from four avid and omnivorous collectors. At least half the manuscripts on show in the *Love and Devotion: from Persia and beyond* exhibition came from the collections of these men.

The first of these collectors was the English antiquary Francis Douce (1757-1834), who on his death left his large collection of printed books and manuscripts to the Bodleian Library. Among some 480 manuscripts, mainly medieval and European, were eleven albums described as containing Persian, Hindu or Indian pictures or drawings. Nine years later, in 1843, the Library purchased Sir William Ouseley's splendid collection of Persian manuscripts, which he and his brother, Sir Gore Ouseley, had assembled between 1787 and 1814. Gore (1770-1844) and William (1769-1842) both collected Persian manuscripts, but Gore was the one who was seduced by Mughal art. Then in 1859, a magnificent donation of 600 Persian manuscripts was received from the Bengal civil servant, James Bardoe Elliott. Elliott's collection included many of Gore Ouseley's manuscripts that he had purchased after Gore's death in 1844. Only one manuscript in Elliott's donation was a Mughal manuscript, but it was a particularly splendid and special example – a copy of the poet Jami's *Baharistan* made in 1595 for the Emperor Akbar.<sup>4</sup> Lastly, in the 1870s, additional manuscripts belonging to Gore Ouseley were bought by the Bodleian from his son, Frederick.

The Mughal paintings bequeathed or donated to the Bodleian during this 25-year period, i.e. between 1834 and 1859, allied to Laud's gift and some later acquisitions, now form one of the world's most significant collections in this field.

## **The Collection**

Currently the collection numbers about 600 paintings, some loose, some collected in albums, and some within bound manuscripts of literary works. It includes masterpieces from the first century of Mughal painting (1560-1660), as well as fine later works from the 17th century to the early-19th century. Though an historic and important collection, it is important to emphasise that, with few exceptions, most of the Bodleian's Mughal paintings and manuscripts were acquired by chance or circumstance, often incidentally, as part of other collections, and were not the objects of deliberate choice.

In this article only a brief flavour of the character and quality of the Bodleian's collection of Mughal paintings can be given.<sup>5</sup> Descriptions and illustrations of three paintings created between about 1580 and 1650 in northern India will serve as examples. Generally, these miniatures were painted for a small elite circle. They mirror the life of the court – a life of conspicuous wealth and magnificence. It was a Persianate culture, where manuscript paintings had an important place and Persian was the language of the court. By the 1590s, Emperor Akbar had more than 100 master painters in his studio/



St Matthew writing his Gospel.  
Painted by Kesu Das, dated 996 (1587–8)  
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford,  
MS. Douce Or. a. 1, fol. 41v.

scriptorium, many more than in the court ateliers of Persia and Turkey at the time. For the prolific output that Akbar commissioned, it was necessary to recruit large numbers of local Indian artists, Hindu as well as Muslim. Consequently the Persian painting tradition was quickly transformed. The most striking characteristic of the resulting new Mughal style was its naturalism.

The painting of St Matthew writing his Gospel is of considerable interest (above). It was painted during the middle of Akbar's reign, and it may be thought to be an unusual painting to find in a Mughal album. But Emperor Akbar (reigned 1556-1605) was profoundly interested in theology and comparative religion and tolerant of different faiths in his empire. In 1578 he sent a friendly invitation to the Portuguese Jesuit fathers, who had landed some years previously at Goa, saying

'know that I am most kindly disposed towards you . . . send me two learned priests who should bring with them the chief books of the Law and the Gospel, for I wish to study and learn the Law and what is best and most perfect in it . . . they will be at liberty to return as soon as they like . . . let them not have the slightest fear to come'<sup>6</sup>



The dying 'Inayat Khan.  
Attributed to Balchand, 1618.  
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford,  
MS. Ouseley Add. 171, fol. 4v.



Shah Jahan receives a Persian nobleman.  
Attributed to Payag, c. 1640.  
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford,  
MS. Ouseley Add. 173, fol. 13v.

The resulting first Jesuit mission to the Mughal court in 1580 introduced to it European paintings and devotional literature, much of it with Christian themes, that greatly appealed to Akbar. Thus court artists were set to work to imitate them.

Kesu Das portrays St Matthew writing his gospel in a volume held by an attendant angel – a subject that was copied from an engraving after a 16th-century Dutch painter.<sup>7</sup> The unconventional way in which the angel leans his knee on the evangelist's leg reflects the original engraving, but otherwise the figures are softer and the atmosphere more relaxed than in the source, while some Mughal touches, the cat for instance, have been added. The vessel at the bottom right bears the artist's signature and date 996 (1587-8).

A powerful portrait comes from the reign of Jahangir (ruled 1605-27), who like his father was fascinated by painting (see. p 111). During his reign there was a move away from the illustration of history and fables to individual pictures and portraits that could be brought together in an album. This is one of the most extraordinary and famous of all Mughal portraits. Fortunately we have a detailed description by the Emperor Jahangir himself in his autobiography of the event that led to the picture being painted.<sup>8</sup> In 1618 'Inayat Khan, described by Jahangir as 'one of my intimate attendants', was dying from addiction to opium and alcohol. He wanted to go to Agra and was brought before Jahangir to seek permission for his journey. Jahangir was so moved by his emaciated appearance, that 'as it was a very extraordinary case' he directed painters to take his portrait. The following day, 'Inayat Khan died.

Twenty or so years later, the Mughal ruler Shah Jahan was portrayed receiving a Persian nobleman – an image depicting imperial majesty, which with the serried ranks of courtiers and attendants, is an excellent example of a typical court painting of the time (see. p 111). The event took place in 1638 and the Persian nobleman, Yadgar Beg, is on the left in the gold robe with flowers. He salutes the emperor Shah Jahan by touching his turban. The five horses shown at the bottom of the image are gifts from him for the Emperor. Imperial attendants wave yak-tail fly-whisks, and below the throne a marble panel shows symbols of a just and peaceable ruler.

### **Three Oxford Bound Mughal Manuscripts in the Melbourne 'Love and Devotion' Exhibition**

The six paintings from the Bodleian's bound Mughal manuscripts that were displayed in the exhibition *Love and Devotion: From Persia and Beyond* necessarily represented only one double-page opening of each manuscript, giving a tantalising, but incomplete, glimpse into Mughal (as opposed to Persian) imagery of love and devotion.<sup>9</sup> Each of these three manuscripts has a rich history and makes an important contribution to the story of the development of painting at the Mughal court in the late-16th and early-17th centuries, as well as providing evidence for a Mughal interpretation of two classics of Persian/Islamic literature. While it is not possible here to show images of all the paintings in these bound manuscripts that could not be seen in Melbourne (the images that were



Majnun taken to the Ka'ba by his father.  
 From a manuscript of Nizami, *Layla u Majnun*, painted by Lohanga, c. 1590.  
 Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Pers. d. 102, p. 27.

'behind the scenes'), their content can be summarised and illustrated with a further example from each manuscript volume.

## The Story of Layla and Majnun

This is the manuscript known as the 'Atkinson Layla and Majnun', because in the 19th century it belonged to James Atkinson (1780-1852), who spent 42 years in India as a surgeon and administrator.<sup>10</sup> In 1836, using this manuscript, he published the first translation into English of the romantic poem *Layla u Majnun* composed by Nizami in 1188.<sup>11</sup> The text of the manuscript copy was probably copied in the 1560s, with gaps left for the nine illustrations that were not completed until the 1590s – but with real finesse and style. The names of the artists are recorded on most of them and they were some of the finest painters from the Akbarian court at the time.

The Atkinson Layla and Majnun illustrates some scenes in the story that are not regularly depicted – for example Majnun's father taking him to the Ka 'ba (see p. 113), by the artist Lohanga, and Majnun redeeming the deer from the huntsman.<sup>12</sup> In the Ka 'ba image the arrangement is typical of Persian painting, but the faces and camels are very Mughal in style, while the picture shows little European influence. Were the artists Hindus? And if so, what did they know about making the Hajj to Mecca? Similarly, the image of Majnun, the hunter and the gazelle shows the transition from a Persian to a new Mughal style of painting. In the words of James Atkinson's translation, 'Majnun, delighted, view'd his purchased prize, and in the gazelle's sees his Laili's eyes'.<sup>13</sup>

## The *Baharistan*, or 'Garden of Spring'

This copy of the *Baharistan*, an ethical text of moral stories illustrated with anecdotes composed by the poet and scholar Jami in 1487, was made for the Emperor Akbar in Lahore in 1595, and acquired by Gore Ouseley in 1800.<sup>14</sup> It was clearly one of his treasured possessions, for he had it bound in rose-coloured velvet with metalwork decoration. Gore Ouseley's interest in Persian art was well known among London bibliophiles of the day,<sup>15</sup> and we also know that this particular manuscript, then owned by him, was specifically brought to the attention of habitués of London's literary salons in the early-19th century.<sup>16</sup> No fewer than sixteen painters of the greatest eminence from Akbar's imperial workshops contributed to its embellishment. Five worked on the paintings and eleven on the decorated margins – all of which, unusually, are signed by the artists. In addition to many superbly decorated margins, the manuscript includes fine examples of the work of two great Mughal painters: Basawan, who flourished 1580-1600 and Miskin who was active around the same time. In the exquisite borders, Mughal artists were developing a Persian practice of painting natural and mythological animals, birds and plants in several different shades of gold. Every margin was different and unique. Akbar's painters introduced human figures into the fantastical scenes, and partially tinted them to magnificent effect.<sup>17</sup>

Basawan's rendering of the story of the Mullah rebuking the Dervish for his

pride in his beautiful darns was very particular, subdued and harmonious – the representation of the two men – one persuasive, the other hostile, contrasting with the delicacy of the mended garment.<sup>18</sup> Miskin portrays the story of the Unfaithful Wife, or Lover's Meeting in a quite different style and with jewel-like colours (see p. 116). All stages of a rather complicated story are included in this painting, with the moonlit rocks adding a threatening note. At the top, beneath a full moon, are the lovers, Ashtar and Jayida. Their camels are waiting on the left, whilst three horses on the right prance about beside them. In the middle is the husband's tent, in which Ashtar's friend has taken Jayida's place. Unfortunately the friend knocked over the milk that Jayida's husband brought her each night, and the husband started to whip the friend, until he was rescued by the mother and sister of Jayida. A cow, sheep, goats and other animals are beautifully observed, as is the intricate tent-covering with its hunting scenes.

### **The Douce Album – Princely Devotion**

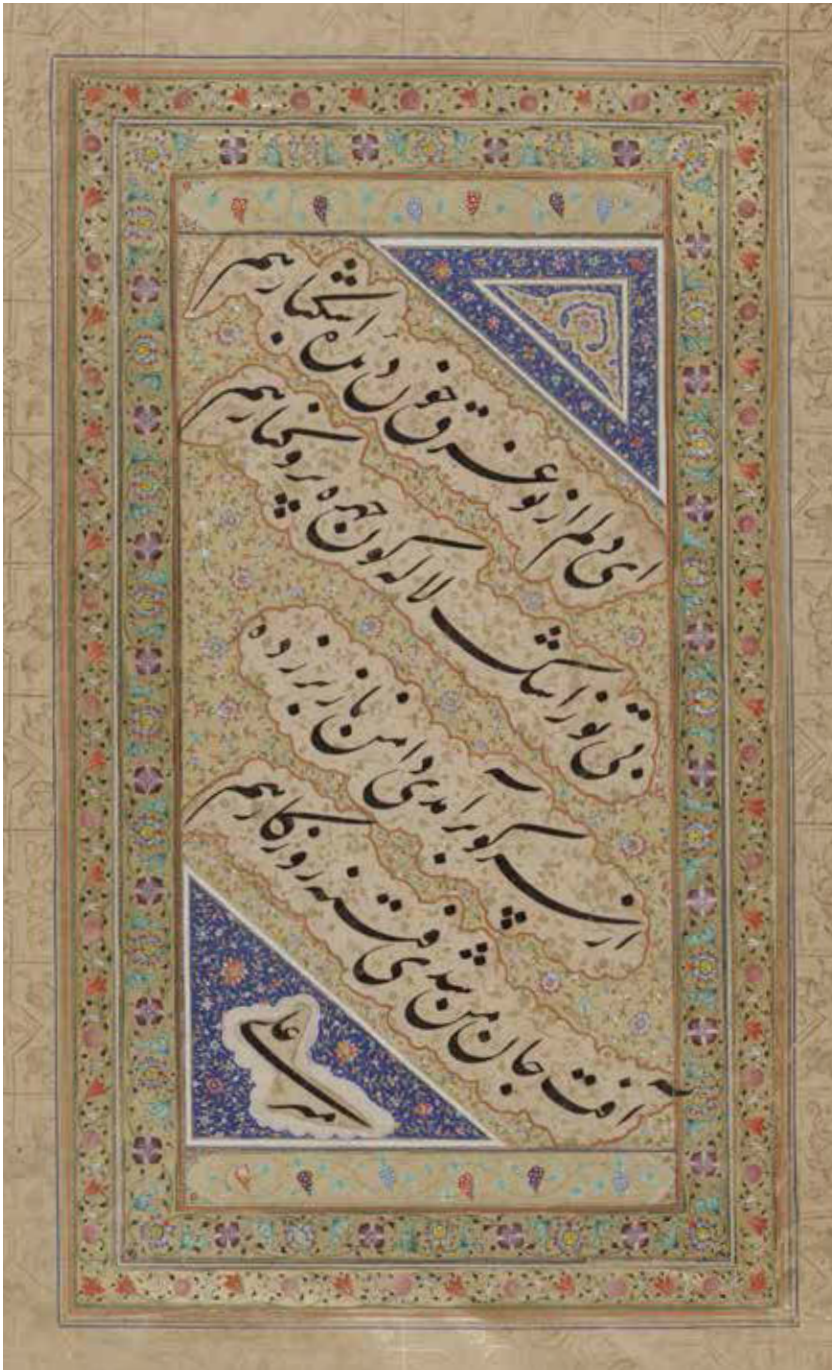
The third manuscript is a magnificent *muraqqa* ' album (a bound volume of paintings and calligraphy) from the collection of Francis Douce.<sup>19</sup> It contains 41 paintings and 37 very fine decorated calligraphic pieces and it must have caught the eye of Douce quite early in his collecting career, for he bought it at a sale in 1790 when he was 33 years old.<sup>20</sup> The album is thought to have been assembled in the mid-17th century for a member of the Mughal imperial family,<sup>21</sup> but we know little of its history over the 140 years between its compilation and when it appeared for sale, apart from its being owned successively by the Chauncy brothers, Charles and Nathaniel. Charles (1709-77) was a physician and antiquary, who left his books, paintings, prints and coins to his brother Nathaniel (d. 1790).

The paintings are particularly expressive of the Mughal lineage of Shah Jahan (ruled 1628-58), and are interleaved with calligraphic specimens, many of which are attributed to Mir 'Ali, of Herat, the famous master of calligraphy who flourished in the 1520s-40s, that on folio 55r being dated 937 (1530). Nine leaves of text at folios 10v-18r contain portions of Jami's *Tuhfat al-ahrar*. In the mid-17th century many of the paintings and calligraphic pieces were extended at the top, bottom and sides and some painters have used the *nim qalam* technique, of Persian origin, in which only parts of the picture are coloured, and much of the surface is just lightly tinted or stippled. The borders were often used to disguise extensions to the page. The mixed subjects include the illustrious Mughal ancestors of Shah Jahan – that is, Babur, Humayun, Akbar and Jahangir, not forgetting Amir Timur, or Tamerlane, Babur's grandfather, the last Mongol nomad conqueror who reigned at the end of the 14th century and established the Timurid dynasty. From Jahangir's memoirs, we know that he loved hunting.<sup>22</sup> Heroic acts such as lion hunting, long considered a kingly pursuit in the cultures of Western Asia, were often recorded in official art, and this album is no exception, including two such examples.<sup>23</sup> There are a number of paintings of Shah Jahan himself, of various Mughal princes, of shaykhs and dervishes, of Layla and Majnun, of Layla and Farhad, of





The story of the unfaithful wife.  
From a disbound manuscript of Jami, *Baharistan*, copied for Mughal Emperor Akbar, dated year 39, Ilahi era, reign of Akbar (1595), Lahore, painted by Miskin.  
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Elliott 254, fol. 42r.



Calligraphy by Mir 'Ali, active 1520s–40s.  
From a Mughal album,  
Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS. Douce Or. a. 1, fol. 22r.

Rustam, and of King Solomon, as well as four Christian subjects copied or adapted from European prints.

One of the 37 folios of decorated Persian calligraphy with which the paintings in this album are interspersed (see p. 117), is an anonymous epigram about love-sickness signed but not dated by Mir ‘Ali. Roughly translated it reads:

Oh my heart drowning in sobs and my eyes raining tears  
Without you my face and lap are full of tulip-coloured tears  
When you entered my heart the tent-flap was thrown open  
You became the affliction of my soul and the disruption of my days.<sup>24</sup>

From the large number of extant examples signed by Mir ‘Ali, we can surmise that he specialised in producing large scale calligraphic specimens, which, like this and other calligraphic examples in this *muraqqa* ‘, were later incorporated into albums and given elaborate borders.<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, deserving special mention, are the magnificent outer covers and inner doublures (ornamental linings to the inner faces of the cover boards) of the Douce Album. The binding is papier-mache, painted and lacquered with a calf spine added in Europe. Painting on papier-mache binding-boards under lacquer varnish was first introduced from China in the 16th century.<sup>26</sup> The covers are probably Mughal mid to late-17th century and the outer boards depict red martagon lilies on a gold background with small ducks sailing across the lower edges.