

Exhibition Texts

Life as a Prince

20 February – 7 June 2020

Between the 16th and 19th centuries, Indian painting meant almost exclusively court art. The miniatures were produced by ateliers for the imperial Mughal palace and the many princely courts across South Asia. The pictures, in form of albums, series, or folios, were designed specifically for these illustrious circles. Along with themes from the Indian subcontinent's many legends, religious narratives, and recorded traditions, life at court was a key pictorial theme. Everyday life in the villages, on the other hand, was of no particular interest.

One of the main tasks of artists was to stage and represent rulers in accordance with their status. They were the commissioners of the artworks and, hence, were depicted in all their splendour and power in the performance of their duties, or else in the form of portraits, adorned with all their attributes and accessories to indicate their distinguished standing or highlight their extraordinary personality.

However, rulers performing their duties was not the only topic; the paintings often also depicted life at court as such, including religious events, ceremonies, as well as leisure time activities – all the aspects of a prince's life at court were recorded on paper. The Mughal palace served as the paragon to be emulated. Representations of life at court were an old iconographic tradition practised, among others, at the Timurid court, and introduced to the Indian subcontinent by the Grand Mughals. By and by, the tradition was taken over by smaller Hindu principalities and further developed or, as the case may be, adapted to the local style of painting. In the following, we find purposely staged panoramas of everyday life at court, usually focussed on a specific theme, showing princes and their followings in single images as well as series. The depicted features and style of representation vary according to epoch and region. However, some of the symbols of power such as weapons, horses, elephants, or birds of prey, along with certain topoi such as scenes from the women's quarters, falconry, and pleasure gardens seem to have belonged to the favoured representational conventions of court life across all epochs and regions.

Based on a selection of paintings from the museum's own collections, the exhibition offers a glimpse of the luxurious life of South Asian princes – and ladies at court – from the imperial Mughal palace to the smaller principalities across the subcontinent.

Portraits of rulers: the art of self-staging

Across the Indian subcontinent, miniature painting was an elitist art restricted to the courts and nobility. Accordingly, the way princes and emperors, the painters' primary clients, were portrayed was key. When depicting rulers, realistic representation was only secondary; it was all about the staging of self. Although some rulers are recognizable by characteristic facial features, the portrayal of power clearly takes centre stage.

Representational conventions tend to vary according to time and region: rulers had themselves portrayed outdoors against a background of landscapes and lush vegetation as well as in luxurious interiors furnished with carpets and cushions. In other portraits, they feature against a monochrome backdrop, often holding in their hands a specific accessory that symbolized power or hinted at an aspect of their personality. Flowers, weapons, hookahs and similar items serve as insignia to communicate a ruler's image and standing. These often vary according to court and era. In Mughal paintings, for instance, rulers are never shown smoking a hookah, as opposed to pictures from smaller, mostly Hindu princely courts, where the water pipe was fashionable and served as an

important status symbol. However, self-staging relied not only on specific material accessories but also on animals associated with power and high status, such as falcons, horses, and elephants.

The role of rulers

Apart from portraits, rulers were often also shown in the exercise of their duties; in this case, their superior status in relation to their entourage was usually conveyed through the way the courtiers carried themselves, the way they dressed, and the composition of the painting as a whole. The painstakingly depicted entourage thus becomes a means to enhance the figure of the ruler and his power even more emphatically.

Popular motifs included a ruler's special duties and responsibilities such as receptions, audiences (darbar), talks with other princes or with subjects, and other events at court. These scenes often also reveal different phases and customs dictated by court protocol, both as far as the details of clothing and adornment were concerned, as well as in terms of specific gestures such as offering a guest betel nut.

Life as a prince: music, art and hunting

Court life and culture were popular themes in miniature painting. Through a variety of select motifs and subtle details, the paintings cast a light on the life of princes and their following at court. The princes were portrayed as art connoisseurs and aesthetes: they are surrounded by beautiful women and enjoy the luxury of lavishly styled palace rooms, summer pavilions, and pleasure gardens. Such depictions underpinned the image of the prince not only as a powerful but also as a cultivated ruler, well versed in art and literature, at times even a poet himself. Knowledge of art, dance, and music was expected of a ruler; one could almost say it belonged to his set of duties. Many sovereigns were also generous patrons of the arts, including the Mughal emperors Akbar (1542–1605), Jahangir (1569–1627) and Shahjahan (1592–1666), but also a number of lesser rulers such as Sansar Chand of Kangra (ca 1765–1823). Apart from becoming familiar with the arts and settling down to a life of refinement, young princes were also instructed in hunting and the arts of combat – both important aspects of life at court. Hunting scenes provided an opportunity to depict a ruler's courage and prowess; at the same time, it allowed artists to render beautiful landscapes and animals in naturalistic detail. Hunting was by no means an exclusively male domain; court ladies also took part in these expeditions.

Religion and festivities

Princes and rulers not only sponsored the arts; often they were also the patrons of specific religious traditions. As children, they were instructed by scholars and spiritual teachers, and often also learnt about religious and philosophical topics. Religious feasts and ceremonies were an integral part of court life. Hindu princes, in particular, liked to have themselves depicted as devotees of a specific deity and as model worshippers. Such paintings not only reflected their religious attitude and sense of devotion but also helped to underpin and legitimize their power as rulers. In some cases, they illustrate a ruler's desire to transfer the features of a certain deity or hallmarks of a specific cult to himself in person, such as in the case of Raja Sidh Sen of Mandi.

In addition to religious rituals and ceremonies, large festivals such as Holi, the "Festival of Colours", were also rendered in image. Representations of such events gave artists the opportunity to celebrate a court in all its wealth and splendour. Smaller, more personal ceremonies relating to the rites of passage in a ruler's life such as weddings or matrimonial processions also served as significant and splendid motifs in the repertoire of court painters.

Life of the ladies at court

In the representation of queens and court ladies, the display of power and status played a less prominent role than in the portrayal of rulers. Although many princesses, royal consorts, and even

concubines wielded political influence, the women in a prince's following were usually depicted busy with daily chores and duties. Their facial features, too, are stylized and reveal no signs of personal identity. The miniatures illustrate the court ladies going about their daily routine, and it was probably up to the painter's artistic licence to include features that revealed feelings and emotions. Thus, apart from portraits and scenes of courtly receptions, the works occasionally also alluded to the personal dramas and love stories going on in the women's quarters.

Playing music, reading, viewing pictures, having fun in the palace gardens, looking after the children ... such everyday female activities were popular subjects in painting. Besides the princes, court ladies, too, were often major patronesses of the arts – some are actually even remembered as talented musicians and poetesses. The life of women, even within their secluded quarters, was varied and by no means exclusively centred on the world of men. Apart from typical scenes showing princes in women's chambers, artists often also depicted groups of women in lively conversation, thus offering a glimpse into a realm otherwise separated from the outside world. In addition to scenes from the women's quarters behind palace walls, artists liked to depict women hunting and riding in the forest. It gave artists an opportunity to display their talent for naturalistic details and their flair for pictorial composition.

Heroines and lovers

Women are usually depicted either as blissful or as yearning lovers. Amorous desire was a core theme in the painterly description of the world of women. Thereby, miniatures often took their cue from court literature. The so-called *Barahmasa* series (illustrations to the *Barahmasa* ballads, poems that portray the twelve months of a year) and the so-called *Ragamala* series (illustrations depicting musical modes and aesthetic moods) throw light on the world of the ladies at court, showing their life among themselves as well as in the company of a princely lover. These series often play on the favourite topoi of the yearning, the separation and the reunification of lovers, omnipresent themes in Indian court poetry and literature. In these painting series, moods and emotions are evoked by the settings, choice of colours, and facial expressions.

Equally frequent in miniature painting are scenes from the life of mythical heroines and legendary female companions of princes. In this case, dress, landscapes and rooms often provide precise clues as to the life of court ladies at a specific location. Portraits of women and scenes from the ladies' chambers celebrate female beauty and the subtle feelings and emotions which so often take centre stage in love stories and court poetry. The portraits of anonymous or princely couples frequently also contain allusions to legendary heroes and heroines. Yet, how much imagination and romanticism are woven into these narratives remains an open question.