

# THE INDIAN PORTRAIT

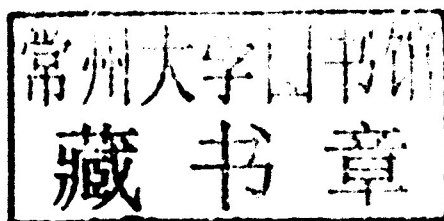




# **THE INDIAN PORTRAIT**

1560–1860

Edited by Rosemary Crill and Kapil Jariwala



National Portrait Gallery, London

## Acknowledgements

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**Rosemary Crill and Kapil Jariwala**

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# Foreword

SANDY NAIRNE

Director, National Portrait Gallery, London

The beautiful paintings in *The Indian Portrait* give fragmentary glimpses into the various cultures that have flourished in the Indian subcontinent, yet simultaneously offer authoritative images of captivating individuals living through the 300-year span of the exhibition. These exquisite depictions are wrought with dazzling skill and technical brilliance – as vivid likenesses of people, their surroundings and often radiant costumes. And however formal the pose or setting, here are individuals brought to life with utter conviction.

The National Portrait Gallery's exhibition *The Raj: India and the British, 1600–1947* held in 1990–1991 emphasised the many levels of connection between Britain and India, before and during the period of empire. Several exhibitions of Indian material have followed in London, including, in 2009, *Garden and Cosmos* and *Maharaja* presented at the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum respectively. *The Indian Portrait* aims to add further to this understanding of the visual arts of India.

*The Indian Portrait* grew from an idea proposed by Kapil Jariwala. It was clear that Indian portraiture was an area of artistic achievement overlooked in Britain and that outstanding works from private and public collections might productively be brought together. We were very pleased that Rosemary Crill, Senior Curator in the Asian Department at the Victoria and Albert Museum, agreed to work as co-curator of the exhibition. My first thanks go to both of them as the hard-working architects of this wonderful project and for their contributions to this book. We are very grateful to the Victoria and Albert Museum for allowing Rosemary to work on the exhibition. I should also like to thank Jerry Losty, Robert Skelton and Susan Stronge for their fascinating essays, and Mike Wheeler, who is among those to whom we are grateful for additional advice.

Kapil Jariwala and Rosemary Crill have worked closely with Sarah Tinsley, Head of Exhibitions, and with Sophie Clark, Exhibitions Manager, and I am very grateful to them, as well as to Celia Joicey, Head of Publications, and Christopher Tinker, Managing Editor, for creating this delightful book, the Luigi and Laura Dallapiccola Foundation for their special support, and Steve Tribe and Anne Brady for their work as copy-editor and designer. My thanks also to Calum Storrie for his work on the exhibition set design. I should also like to thank Pim Baxter, Stacey Bowles, Naomi Conway, Andrea Easey, Neil Evans, Ian Gardner, Michelle Greaves, Ruth Müller-Wirth, Sabina Rahman, Liz Smith and Helen Whiteoak and all the other staff at the Gallery who have worked on the project.

Finally, very special thanks are due to the lenders, both public and private, who have supported the exhibition so generously.

**Opposite:** Detail from 'Kunwar Anop Singh of Devgarh riding with a falcon' (pl. 38).

**Frontispiece (p. 2):** Detail from 'Princes of the House of Timur' (pl. 1).





# Chronology

2nd–1st centuries BC	Ajanta caves excavated and painted (first phase)
1st–3rd centuries AD	Kushans rule parts of central and north-west India
4th–6th centuries	Gupta dynasty rules north India
460–478	Ajanta caves painted (second phase)
12th–16th centuries	Sultanate period in north India
1498	Vasco da Gama discovers sea route to India
1526	Babur enters India and establishes Mughal dynasty
1530–1556	Humayun succeeds Babur as Emperor; in exile in Iran 1540–1555
1556–1605	Akbar rules from Agra, Fatehpur Sikri and Lahore
1580–1583	First Jesuit mission to the Mughal court
1600	British East India Company founded
1608	British establish their first trading post in India at Surat
By 1614	Rajput kingdoms are incorporated into Mughal territory
1605–1627	Jahangir rules from Agra and Lahore
1628–1658	Shah Jahan rules from Agra and Delhi
1658–1707	Aurangzeb rules from Delhi
By 1687	Deccan sultanates are incorporated into Mughal territory
1757	Lord Clive defeats Siraj ud-Daula of Bengal at Plassey, and the British take over Bengal
1858	Bahadur Shah II, the last Mughal Emperor, is deposed and goes into exile in Burma







# Introduction

KAPIL JARIWALA

The face is a layer of skin that covers the box of bone that protects the brain. Yet this physical façade conveys inner emotions, either involuntarily or deliberately, and exposes us to a degree of vulnerability. Its appearance is the identity that makes us recognisable to others and to ourselves. The artists who mastered the poignant art of portrait-painting show themselves to be perceptive at the higher level, that of humanity.

*The Indian Portrait, 1560–1860* explores the development of the genre within the vast body of Indian painting. It looks at the different ways in which Indian artists have approached the portrait over a 300-year period and at various places across the geography of the Indian subcontinent. The story of the Indian portrait is a fascinating journey, encompassing notions of the real and the ideal, the observed and the imagined. The selection presented here consists mainly of paintings of known people and documented portraits, but also includes some that remain anonymous. These images reveal the history of the period, the role of patronage in driving innovation in artistic representation, and the emergence of the artist as an observer with a distinct and subtle vision. Many of them also illuminate the personal histories of the individuals they depict. These works are a record of a rich and complex past, embracing influences from Iran and Europe as well as local Hindu and Muslim traditions. They not only demonstrate the growing self-awareness of how Indians saw themselves, but also how they wished to be seen.

It is generally agreed that a portrait is the recognisable image of a known individual, and that if the artwork represents the sitter's face accurately then it is regarded as a true likeness – a faithful representation of that person. The painting's accuracy is dependent on the satisfaction of the sitter or its patron and corroborated by those who knew the subject. Indeed the painting or

**Opposite:** 'Parviz and women.' Mughal, by Govardhan, c.1615–1620. Chester Beatty Library, Dublin (MS.7A.2).

sculpture could be used to identify an individual, and as an artwork it can reflect the sitter's character, both physical and psychological. In the context of miniature painting, which forms a large proportion of the works discussed here, accuracy in portraiture is a desirable characteristic when the function of the painting is to illustrate and document as a historical record.

The role of the portrait in India is many-faceted – it serves as an official chronicle or eyewitness account, and as a means of revealing the intimate moments of everyday life. The portrait as a tool of propaganda is not unusual in the history of art, but its proliferation and mastery in the Mughal and Rajput courts brought it to a new level of artistry and style. The rise of the 'observed' portrait, instigated largely by European influences, enabled the Mughal artist to address realism, and in turn brought about the 'empathy' portrait. This depicted the sitter, for the first time in Indian art, as a psychological entity, revealing their fallibility and compassion, or simply how they really looked.

The high point of Indian portraiture is, arguably, the part of the Mughal period that spans the reigns of the Emperors Akbar (1555–1605) to Muhammad Shah (1719–1748), but this book begins by looking at the role of the portrait in Indian art and literature before the Mughal conquest of 1526. It then charts the portrait's development from its origins at the Mughal court under the Emperor Akbar, and the peak of its development under Jahangir and Shah Jahan. From the Mughal court, the art of portraiture spread to the Islamic kingdoms (sultanates) of the Deccan further south, and to the small Hindu kingdoms in Rajasthan and the Pahari region or Punjab Hills. In all of these regions, distinctively local styles were overlaid on essentially Mughal prototypes. European influence, which had contributed to the initial emergence of the documentary portrait at the Mughal court, returned emphatically in the eighteenth century during the so-called Company period, when western concepts of realism were applied by Indian artists to local subjects.

The Indian portrait – and indeed Indian painting as a whole – is the sophisticated product of indigenous development and foreign influence. Art in pre-Mughal India was abundant; the subcontinent's art history stretches back over three thousand years prior to the Mughal invasion, from the early Indus valley civilisation (c.2500 BC) through the great Maurya, Gupta and Chola periods (fourth century BC to thirteenth century AD). In time, the centres of power and patronage grew into sizable centres that become synonymous with 'schools' or styles of Indian painting. Hindu princely states in Rajasthan and the Pahari region were scattered and stood isolated, separated by huge distances and by vast deserts, nestled in valleys or perched on mountainous terrain. While some artists travelled between patrons within these areas, their physical remoteness from the Mughal court contributed to a stylistic individuality visible in their art – they developed their own pictorial language as well as employing symbols and motifs to depict their stories and their world. In this context, the physical import of new materials and techniques and the adoption of artistic and aesthetic attitudes registers acutely when foreign influences are incorporated





**Fig. 1** 'The golden egg of Brahma' (*Hiranyagarbha*), c. eighteenth-century Kangra. Gouache on paper. Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi, India.



**Fig. 2** 'Vidhurapandita teaching the sacred doctrine', c. late fifth century. Cave 2, Ajanta, Maharashtra.

into the artistic statement. Most obvious among these is the use of perspective (pl. 6) and working directly from life (pl. 7). The result is a rich hybrid with its own individual dynamic.

Indian art is often characterised by its unabashed erotic representation and sensual religious sculptures, the grandeur of its temples, and forms of painting that were sometimes stylised to the point of abstraction, typified by Jain cosmological paintings and the reductive symbolism in Tantric art (fig. 1). A quintessential example of what is generally regarded as 'Indian' art is to be found at the Ajanta caves, in Maharashtra, Central India, where early examples of the sophisticated portrait (or certainly sensitive likenesses) are included in serene mural paintings, starting in the late first century BC but mainly painted in the fifth century AD. These paintings are surprising in their mastery of naturalism and observation; they display fluidity in marked contrast to the often-formal rigidity of early manuscript painting. At Ajanta there seem to be an equal number of paintings apparently observed from life and those that are idealised, or simply drawn from imagination to portray different types of people. In Cave 2's 'Vidhurapandita teaching the sacred doctrine' (fig. 2), the painting is precise, and there is an exactitude in the depiction of the poses of Vidhurapandita preaching, the Naga King with his halo of serpent hoods symbolic of his kingdom, and his Queen Vimala and daughter Irandati, as they clasp their hands in a gesture that indicates their receptiveness and awe. Here the faces are seen in various attitudes, heads are in three-quarter view, their gaze is focused and directed deliberately at the sage Vidhurapandita as he delivers his sermon; they sit on cushions on a terrace or balcony whose awkward perspective is exciting and makes the whole frieze animated and alive. The colour, though from a limited palette, is used tonally to modulate form, emphasising the almost sculptural quality of these wall paintings. The composition emulates contemporary conventions of bas-relief sculpture, like those at nearby Ellora, where the rock-cut architecture incorporates Buddhist, Hindu and Jain temples. Here, as in the Ajanta murals, the figures are posed in a shallow space, and prominent placement, associated emblems and scale are employed to emphasise the main protagonists in the narrative.

Most early representations of people in Indian art were generalised types rather than accurate likenesses of known individuals. It is important to make a distinction between the portrait that is observed from life and the stylised or stereotype portrait. In both forms, the intended function is worth considering. The stylised image has allusions to the 'ideal' representation, and an idea of physical or moral perfection that can be symbolically conveyed by a gesture, by the type of eyes and mouth or by skin colour. The ideal attributes of heroes and heroines in early Indian art and literature were categorised and prescribed in carefully laid-down canons, which were adhered to faithfully by artists and sculptors. Images of lowlier people, while less frequently painted, were less subject to these constraints. The countless portraits of unknown people, images that have lost their historical and literal name tag, can still be judged to be 'true'