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**RESEARCH PAPER****Unfolding the Opulent Golden Age: Gold in Mughal Miniature Court Paintings in the era of Emperor Shah Jahan (1628-1658)****Samreen Asghar\*<sup>1</sup> Aneela Yaseen<sup>2</sup> Hira Nadeem<sup>3</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study explores the extravagant usage of gold in Mughal miniature court painting to depict overgenerous lifestyle of Mughal emperors, especially evaluates the lavish epoch of Shah Jahan. This paper employs descriptive research method to analyze that gold deeply impacted the visual attraction and became symbolic depiction of Mughal art, with a particular emphasis on Shah Jahan's era, often mentioned to as the Golden Age of the Mughal Empire. With the historical imagery references in Mughal miniature paintings, this paper aims to illuminate the various roles that gold has played, such as a symbol of wealth, decoration, and its connection to Mughal traditional art. The conclusion refers that the gold's enduring symbolism of wealth and power that remains vibrant in contemporary society, preserving its coveted position as a symbol of significance and prestige.

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**KEYWORDS:** Extravagant, Gold, Golden Age, Mughal Empire, Mughal Miniature Painting

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**Introduction**

The Mughal emperors of India were known for their lavish and extravagant lifestyle, frequently using visually stunning demonstrations of luxury to showcase their power and status. Spanning from the early 16th century to the 18th century (Ali, 1975), the Mughal Empire stood out as one of the most influential and wealthy empires during its era (Asher, 1993).

Mughal miniature court paintings were standing out for their extensive use of gold, which served as an opulent and decorative element, lifting the visual charm of the artworks. The Mughal Empire's rich tradition of patronizing the arts, particularly painting, played a major role in this opulent display. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that abundant other Mughal emperors also showcased extravagance and luxury throughout their reigns, collectively contributing to the magnificent history of the Mughal Empire. The Mughal emperors of India gained fame for their luxurious and opulent lifestyles, using grand displays of luxury to assert their power and reputation. From the early 16th to the mid-19th century, the Mughal emperors were admired as one of the most noticeable and rich persons of its time. Residing in lavish palaces, decorated with intricate architecture and luxurious furnishings, these emperors were surrounded by a vast retinue of servants, courtiers, and nobles dedicated to their every caprice (Rezavi, 2010). They actively supported the arts, commissioning splendid masterpieces like paintings, textiles, carpets and exquisite jewelry, all contributing to their remarkable showcase of wealth and splendor. In addition, the Mughal emperors hosted lavish festivals, feasts and ceremonies

that drew attendance from nobles, ambassadors, and dignitaries welcoming from diverse regions. These gatherings showcased extravagant collections of fine wines, food and entertainment, further enhancing the perception of opulence and majesty linked with the Mughal court.

Shah Jahan, who ruled from 1628 to 1658, stands out among the Mughal emperors as the one who most prominently showcased his wealth and luxury. Under his rule, the Mughal Empire achieved the zenith of its social cultural and architectural accomplishments, and he became renowned for his extravagant way of living and unwavering, passionate support of the arts. Among the many renowned examples of displaying opulence, the Peacock Throne stands out as a remarkable example. This magnificent throne, crafted from gold and adorned with precious gemstones, featured an exquisite design depicting two peacocks facing each other. Originally commissioned by Emperor Shah Jahan, it continued to be utilized by subsequent Mughal emperors as a powerful icon of their authority and wealth (Kumar, 2017).

The aesthetics of gold usage in Mughal court paintings developed over time, showcasing unique characteristics compared to both earlier and later periods in Indian art history (Kossak, 1997). The following are some key disparities in the aesthetics of gold usage in Mughal court paintings during different time periods.

### **Early Mughal Period (16th Century)**

#### **Limited Use of Gold**

In the early Mughal period under Emperor Akbar's reign, the use of gold in court paintings was relatively reserved. Artists employed gold infrequently usually as fine lines or minimum quantity to highlight certain elements.

#### **Emphasis on Realism**

Early Mughal paintings focused on capturing realistic representations of human figures, landscapes, scenes and animals. Gold was not as prominent in these works, as the artist's prioritized realism and attention to detail.

### **Mid-Mughal Period (17th Century)**

**Increased Use of Gold:** During the mid-Mughal period under Emperor Jahangir's reign, the use of gold became more noticeable. Artists began incorporating gold in intricate designs, borders, and different patterns, enhancing the visual appeal of the paintings (Glynn, 1996). **European Influence:** Jahangir's reign saw a stream of European artists and art styles into the Mughal court. European techniques, including the use of gold leaf gold ink and gilding, started to effect Mughal miniature paintings during this period (Verma, 2003).

### **Late Mughal Period (18th Century)**

**Abundant Gold Decorations:** In the late Mughal period, particularly during the rule of Emperor Shah Jahan and his successors, the use of gold reached its peak. Paintings featured rich gold decorations, often covering large areas, lavish borders, and architectural elements, symbolizing the lavish Mughal court life.

## **Fusion with European Elements**

In the late Mughal period, artists integrated European influences more prominently, adopting techniques like shading and perspective, and incorporating gold in a manner, evoke the essence of European Baroque art.

## **Material and Methods**

This study employs the qualitative approach that focuses on the objective to explore and acknowledge the perpetual artistic influence of Mughal miniature court paintings, with a particular emphasis on their innovative utilization of gold and its following impact on artistic traditions within the Indian subcontinent. The research study will explore the significance of integrating gold into Mughal miniature court paintings during Emperor Shah Jahan's rule, investigating both, the artistic and cultural implications. Through a comprehensive analysis of carefully selected paintings and historical sources, this investigation aims to uncover the socio-political and cultural backdrop of the Mughal Empire under Emperor Shah Jahan, unrevealing the reasons behind the incorporation of gold in these courtly artworks (Nicoll, 2009). Additionally, the paper seeks to identify the symbolic meanings and thematic representations associated with gold in Mughal miniature paintings, encompassing of its depiction of authority, divinity, wealth and spirituality.

## **Literature Review**

### **Cultural Expression in Arts**

Mughal court paintings were a powerful vehicle for expressing culture. Under the emperor's patronage, artists were inspired to depict diverse aspects of court life, religious motifs, historical events, and landscapes. These paintings beautifully enclosed the refinement and elegance of the Mughal court, reflecting the empire's cultural richness and artistic achievements (Vaishnavi & Ramya, 2022).

### **Advancing the Imperial Ideology**

Court paintings were employed by emperors to promote their royal ancestry and unify their authority. Portraits and depictions of royal events and triumphs highlighted the ruler's legal authority and emphasized their connection with sacred power (Ghosh, 2018). These artworks played a crucial situation in establishing the royal ideology and projecting an striking image of the emperor.

### **Flourishing of Artistry**

The patronage provided by the Mughal emperors fostered and flourished the art scenes across the empire. Artists were encouraged to explore various styles and techniques, resulting in a vibrant and inventive artistic heritage. The regal and royal support provided an environment favorable to artistic creativity, enabling painters to flourish their skills and making magnificent masterpieces (Verma, 2000). The Mughal court paintings left a lasting and great impact on Indian art and culture. The artistic achievements of this particular period continue to motivate contemporary artists, architects and scholars, preserving and enhancing India's cultural legacy.

Over all, Mughal court paintings were not only a reflection of the emperor's interest but also powerful expressions of the empire's culture and political struggles. They played a significant role in shaping the artistic and historical legacy, leaving behind a valuable

cultural heritage that continues to be celebrated and valued today. Mughal emperors, especially during the reigns of Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan, played a central role in nurturing the development of Mughal miniature painting as a court art. Their keen interest in the arts and recognition of the significance of visual representations for preserving cultural heritage fueled their support (Richards, 1993). As passionate art connoisseurs, the emperors actively engaged in commissioning and overseeing the creation of these captivating miniature paintings.

One of the defining characteristics of Shah Jahan's rule as the Mughal emperor was his profound passion for architecture (Koch, 2014). His keen interest in the arts, coupled with a deep appreciation for beauty and grandeur, was well-known. Throughout his reign, he initiated plentiful ambitious construction projects, leaving a heritage with the creation of some of India's most symbolic monuments. Among these structures, the Taj Mahal stands as the most celebrated, commissioned by Shah Jahan as a tomb for his beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who passed away in 1631, situated in Agra. It is honored as one of the world's most stunning and awe-inspiring monuments, the Taj Mahal's impeccable architecture, complex marble inlay work, and symmetrical design indicate the magnificence of Mughal architecture (Dale, 1991). During Shah Jahan's reign, Mughal architecture reached its peak, marked by a balanced integration of Persian, Indian, and Islamic influences (Gulkis, 2021). The distinctive trait of this architectural style was the emphasis on symmetry, elaborate decoration, and the frequent use of white marble decorated with inlay work. The Taj Mahal persists as a timeless symbol of Shah Jahan's profound love for his wife, evidence to his opulent wealth and the immense power he held as the Mughal emperor (Koch, 2005).

In the Shah Jahan era, grand feasts, marvelous celebrations, and luxurious processions were exquisitely decorated with gold elements, emphasizing on the opulence, wealth, and grandeur of the Mughal court. These magnificent events served as an evidence to the emperor's esteemed status and his inclination for creating extravagant and breathtaking environments. Some of the ways in which gold elements were incorporated into these events include:

- Golden Tableware: Exquisite Elegance at Mughal Feasts
- Gleaming Canopies: Magnificent Splendor in Mughal Celebrations
- Golden-Edged Garments: Regal Apparel in Mughal Ceremonies
- Golden Currency and Bountiful Contributions in the Mughal Era
- Gilded Thrones: Opulence Embodied in Gold Inlay
- Golden-Decorated Elephants: Majestic Splendor in Mughal Processions
- Gilded Ornaments: Artistry in Gold Craftsmanship

## **Results and Discussions**

During the Mughal era, particularly in the era of Shah Jahan, artists and ateliers played crucial responsibilities in creating lavish court paintings. Their talent, skill, and constant dedication were essential in creating exquisite artworks that beautifully showcased the luxury and grandeur of the Mughal court. Below are some key roles fulfilled by artists and work places.

### **Skillful Execution**

Mughal court artists exhibited exceptional skills in a variety of painting techniques, expertly handling complicated brushwork, delicate detailing, and the application of gold

and vibrant pigments. With a thorough grasp of proportion and perspective, they created visually captivating compositions.

### **Interpretation of Themes**

The duty of converting themes and subjects, commissioned by the Mughal emperors and nobles placed with the artists. With remarkable skill, they transformed these concepts into visually captivating descriptions, adeptly combining historical events, mythical stories, and court scenes to craft comprehensive and engaging compositions.

### **Court Life Capture**

Artists were confided with the mission of portraying the magnificence of court life and the nobility in their paintings. They skillfully painted scenes of court ceremonies, royal processions, and portraits of the emperor and his companions, showcasing the opulent lifestyle and royal ambiance of the Mughal court.

### **Miniature Painting Expertise**

Mughal court paintings were mostly executed in miniature form, requiring exceptional accuracy and through diligence to detail. Artists at the studios specialized in this complex art, mastering the skill of creating finely detailed compositions on small-scale surfaces.

Gold and Illumination: Applying gold leaf or gold paint to embellish the paintings demanded specialized expertise. Artists skillfully incorporated gold as a symbol of luxury, using it to highlight jewelry, architectural details, and other painting elements, thus enhancing the visual allure of the artworks.

### **Collaborative Work**

Within the workplace, artists frequently engaged in collaborative efforts in the shape of groups, with each individual specializing in separate aspects of the painting process. Some artists concentrated on figures and faces, while others excelled in rendering drapery details, landscapes or calligraphy. This balanced teamwork facilitated a smooth integration of talents and artistic styles.

Adaptation of European Impact: In Shah Jahan's era, Mughal court paintings experienced the influence of European art. Some artists at the ateliers integrated western elements, such as realistic landscape techniques or European-style portraiture, while conserving the essential essence of traditional Mughal art (Akhtar & Ud Din, 2018).

### **Mughal Court Paintings during Shah Jahan's Reign**

Throughout numerous cultures and civilizations, gold has been admired as a symbol of wealth, power, and divinity. Gold has often been associated with rulers and other powerful figures. Crowns, scepters, monarchs and other regal symbols are frequently ornamented with gold, indicating the authority and superiority of the wearer. Its exception, radiant appearance, and resistance to erosion have given it profound symbolism throughout history. Gold's lack and inherent worth have made it a universal symbol of wealth and prosperity. In many societies, having gold has been synonymous with fortune and financial success. It has been used as a form of currency and a standard of economic value. Throughout history, covering objects in gold has been a way to enhance their importance and connect them with the ruling nobles (Popp, 2019).

Depictions of Shah Jahan's rule and luxurious lifestyle were prominent themes in Mughal miniature paintings of the era (Siddiquie, 1988). Artists of the Mughal court depicted the luxury and magnificence of the Mughal court protocol, painting a visual representation of the emperor's royal lifestyle. Illuminated manuscripts and albums from Shah Jahan's time featured the maximum use of gold elements, often applied in the form of gold leaf, gold pigment, or gold ink. The use of gold enhanced the visual attraction of the artworks which gives a sense of luxury and opulence to the viewer. Precious materials like gemstones, onyx and jade were also incorporated, further highlighting the royal support behind these exceptional pieces. Some key aspects of these depictions depict:

### Royal Court Scenes

Mughal miniature paintings often highlighted elaborate court scenes, showing Shah Jahan surrounded by attendants, nobles, and notables. These paintings showcased the hierarchical system of the court, with officers and advisors in attendance, emphasizing the emperor's central control (Fig.1).

### Processions and Celebrations

Paintings depicted the emperor's grand processions and celebratory events, such as religious festivals, royal weddings and victory parades. These scenes conveyed the magnitude and grandeur of these occasions, highlighting the emperor's distinction and the glory of the court's events (Fig.1).



Figure. 1: An illustrated folio from the Padshahnama (Book of Kings). By Bichitr. Early to mid - 17th century. Source: Joshi, H. (2019).

In Jharokha and Darbar scenes portrayed the emperor or other royalty appearing before the public from a palace balcony (jharokha). These paintings highlighted the use of gold in the architectural elements and accompaniments of the palace. In Fig.1, the court painter Bichitr captures the coronation ceremony of Shah Jahan in his painting. The Emperor can be observed welcoming his sons. The opulent floral patterns and intricate gold detailing contribute to the certain opulence of the painting.

### Architecture and Forts

Artists skillfully rendered architectural particulars of royal palaces and forts, showcasing the lavish settings in which the emperor lived and held court. Elaborate buildings with complex designs, lush gardens, and decorative elements were common features in these paintings (Fig. 2).

### Peacock Throne

Shah Jahan's famous Peacock Throne, a magnificent throne covered with precious gems, was a frequent subject in paintings. These depictions showcased the emperor seated on the throne, highlighting its worth as a symbol of royal authority (Fig. 2).



Figure. 2: The Weighing of Shah Jahan on His Forty-Second Lunar Birthday by Bhola, c. 1635, from the Padshahnama. Source: Joshi, H. (2019).

The paintings in Mughal era capture the magnificence and worth of every royal event by portraying delicate details, depicting the wealth and representation of the Mughal

court. In Fig. 2, Bhola's painting is showcasing the luxurious lifestyle, "The Weighing of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan on His Forty-Second Lunar Birthday," created around 1635 for the marvelous *Pādshāhnāma* (Book of Kings).

### Garden Scenes

Paintings of imperial gardens, such as the Shalimar Bagh and gardens with fruits showed the integration of gold in the water fountains, marble pavilions, and involved floral patterns (Fig. 3).

### Leisure Pursuits

Paintings also depicted the emperor engaged in leisurely activities, such as hunting, polo, and music performances. These scenes highlighted the emperor's gratitude for the arts and his pursuit of pleasure and amusement (Kabir, 2019) (Fig. 3).



Figure. 3. Shah-Jahan hunting lions at Burhanpur, c. 1630–1640, from the *Padshahnamah*. Source: Bâburî, S. N. (2012).

Some of the subjects of Mughal Miniature paintings depict the emperor's leisure activities like hunting, polo, and music performances, highlighting his interest for the arts and his pursuit of pleasure. Fig. 3, found towards the end of the *Padshahnamah* volume, is paired with a text describing a hunt that happened in 1637, introducing the unique entitlement of Mughal Emperors to hunt lions and tigers in Hindustan.

### Exquisite Clothing and Jewelry

Shah Jahan's portraits and court scenes depicted him ornamented in lavish apparel, often featuring extravagant patterns, fine textiles, and adorned with expensive gemstones. His opulent jewelry, including gem-encrusted crowns, necklaces and swords further emphasized his wealth and royal status (Schimmel, 2004) (Fig. 4).



## Illuminated Manuscripts

Lavishly illustrated manuscripts with intricate calligraphy and miniatures often contained gold leaf accents, adding to the magnificence of the books.

One notable example is the *Padshahnama*, historical manuscript of Shah Jahan's reign, contained many miniature paintings that recorded key events of his rule. This manuscript was decorated with gold and complex designs, reflecting the emperor's love for artistic passion and luxury (Komala, 1982) (Fig. 4).



Figure 4: Standing Portrait of Shah Jahan with a Pendant containing his Portrait. Painted by Chitarman 1627–28. Source: (Dirlam, Rogers & Weldon, 2019).

Shah Jahan's portraits and court scenes often depicted him wearing opulent clothing, adorned with intricate patterns, exquisite fabrics, and precious gemstones. In Fig. 4, one of his earliest dated paintings, Shah Jahan appeared in resplendent dress, embellished with jewels, and the imagery combines elements influences from European art, such as the presence of his imperial halo and hovering angels.

## Conclusion

To conclude, this research paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the utilization of gold in Mughal miniature court paintings, focusing specifically during the era of Emperor Shah Jahan. It elucidates the conventional, traditional, historical, and artistic significance of this remarkable practice, contributing to deeper insights of the Golden Age of prosperity within the Mughal Empire. The paper also evaluates Emperor Shah Jahan's role as an art supporter, highlighting his personal interest in the arts and his particular preference for the use of gold in court paintings. Emperor Shah Jahan's inclination for art and his support probably encouraged Mughal artists to explore and having experiment with the use of gold, leading to a flourishing period of artistic appearance throughout his

reign. In this context, we discover that Shah Jahan's lasting impact on Mughal art is symbolized by his extensive usage of gold, an influence that has a lasting impression on the artistic traditions of the emperor. The extensive use of gold in Mughal miniature paintings, architectural creations, and ornamental arts showcased the emperor's status as a great supporter of the arts and a ruler with sovereign wealth and power. Shah Jahan's support of Mughal miniature paintings raised the art form to new heights. The extensive use of gold leaf and gold paint in these paintings added a new sense of magnificence and richness to the artworks, reflecting the emperor's distinguished taste and appreciation for artistic subtlety.

The lavishness and grandeur connected with Shah Jahan's era left a great impact on subsequent generations of artists and rulers. The use of gold in Mughal art continued to be celebrated by later Mughal rulers, even in post-Mughal Indian art and Mughal architecture. Overall, the lasting and powerful symbolism of gold as a representation of wealth, power, and divinity has made it a valued and admired metal in worldwide cultures. Its significance continues to boom in contemporary society; where gold remains a highly desired resource and a lasting symbol of value and status.

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