

Emily Hannam - Bichitr and Ramdas, The Padshahnama

EMILY HANNAM: Hello. My name is Emily Hannam, and I'm Assistant Curator of the Islamic and South Asian Collections here at the Royal Collection Trust. Today we're in Windsor Castle, and we're in the paper conservation studio of the Royal Library. Now, the Royal Library is responsible for more than 100,000 books and manuscripts. And in the conservation studio, this is where they are conserved and prepared and made sure that they're in the best possible condition for display.

So today, we're looking at one of the most famous South Asian manuscripts from the Royal Library's collection called the Padshahnama. A manuscript is a book that has been written by hand. And so these paintings have actually been removed from the text block of the manuscript and mounted in such a way as to prevent over handling and loss of paint when the pages are turned.

The manuscript was commissioned by the fifth Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan. And what it is, is really a narrative of his reign.

The Mughals were a Muslim dynasty from South Asia who ruled from the 17th up into the mid-19th century. The name Padshahnama translates as the 'Book of Emperors'. And it was really commissioned by the emperor as a celebration of his reign and his dynasty.

Now, the Padshahnama contains 42 painted illustrations. And these are particularly important because they depict an event during Shah Jahan's accession ceremonies in 1628. These two paintings are by two different artists.

On the right, we have a tiny inscription in Persian just here that reads, 'work of the most insignificant slave Bichitr'. The term slave here is not meant literally. It's really a phrase of humility. And it's very symbolic where he's positioned his signature right under the feet of the emperor.

In the left-hand side, we actually have a self-portrait of the artist. And his name is Ramdas, and he's written it on the folder that he's holding. By situating himself at the very edge of the painting he is making a statement about his humility or his modesty.

Now, you need to all remember that these paintings are from a manuscript. And so they're both painted on paper. The material is what we would commonly term watercolour. So the artist would grind organic, mineral and metallic pigments down to a fine powder, which they would then bind with a binding such as gum arabic with water to create a fluid pigment.

Now, the art is painted with very fine squirrel hair brushes. And if you look very closely, you can see that certain areas have been burnished so they have a shiny appearance. And others have been left matte. And there are even some areas where the artists have used a fine needle to incise certain details in the painting. So you get these amazing different effects when the light shines on

the paper. And we can see this particularly in the gold platform just below where the emperor is sitting.

Now we know who painted them and what they're made of I can talk a little bit about what they depict. So if we look on the right, we're in the hall of public audience in the Agra Fort. And it's spring in 1628. And this is accession ceremony of the Mughal emperor. The text accompanying this painting describes how the emperor's three eldest sons kissed the ground before the feet of the emperor and gave him a symbolic offering of gold coins.

And so Bichitr, the painter has depicted the very moment that the eldest son Dara Shukoh is kissing the ground before the emperor. So the idea of this painting is very much one of dynastic continuity.

As well as the narrative elements of this painting, there's a lot of symbolism going on. So if you look at the very top, in the shamiana, the awning, above the emperor's head, we have the huma bird, which is the Persian bird of paradise. And according to Persian tradition, whoever's head the huma flies over will become a great king. Around his head is a gold halo, and this represents divine light, the light that transmitted from God to kings.

Directly below the balcony where the emperor is sitting we have a very interesting image of a globe. And on either side of the globe are two mullahs, so two Muslim clerics. And they represent religious authority. Directly between them is a gold chain with bells. Now, this represents the chain of justice. And supposedly, this was a real chain that hung from the Agra Fort down to the river. And anyone from across the whole Mughal empire could come and ring the bells on this train to attract the emperor's attention. And so this really symbolises Shah Jahan's commitment to justice. Below that, we have two lions and a lamb lying peacefully together. And what this symbolises is the harmony of the Mughal state under Shah Jahan's rule.

Now, you might be wondering what this wonderful golden platform in front of the emperor is for. Now this is where the mullah will come to read the Friday sermon in the emperor's name for the first time. And this is a declaration of his sovereignty. From here, the sermon will be issued to all mosques across the Mughal empire to inform them of Shah Jahan's accession.

Now, on the left-hand side at the top here, we have a group of wonderful musicians. And they provide the oral accompaniment for these long, lengthy ceremonies. The most important instruments among them are the kettle drums and the trumpet, because when these are played this is a symbol that the emperor is present. Now the positioning of them above the walls of the fort is particularly important, because what they do is provide an audible link between the emperor inside and those beyond the city walls.

During court ceremonies such as this, which are called durbars, the emperor would always sit in this balcony at the middle of the far end wall of the hall of public audience. And a strict hierarchy was enforced in terms of who could stand closest to the emperor. So on the highest register here we have the imperial family. Now next down, we have all the nobles and the highest members of the court. And then you can see there's even a gold railing. And beyond that are the lesser nobles.

So you can see that even just the composition reflects the power dynamics of court. The idea is that Shah Jahan is at the head of a very centralised hierarchical state. If you look at the gazes of the figures of the painting, you can see that they almost zigzag up and across. So the only people who are allowed to look directly at the emperor himself are members of the imperial family.

There are no known paintings of Shah Jahan in anything other than strict profile. If we look at the figure of the emperor, he doesn't engage with anyone except his son. And this really creates a boundary between the viewer and the emperor.

During the ceremonies, everyone at court would have had to stand. And they were all given a specific position, and they weren't allowed to talk. That rigid formality of the ceremony is really captured in the painting.

It's a very balanced composition with a strong vertical axis. And if you look closely, almost every element on the left is mirrored by an element on the right.

The artist uses both the hyper-real and illusion to recreate the glory, the opulence, but also the power dynamics at the Mughal court. But this image of the Mughal court was really created by Shah Jahan himself. He closely supervised all of his artists. And they were under very strict control as to what they could paint and how they could paint it. So it's a very orchestrated image, and the idea is to make manifest Shah Jahan's imperial ideals.

Now, what was the purpose of this image? Numerous copies of the Padshahnama text were written during Shah Jahan's reign. These were for presentation to princes or to nobles. But the copy we have here at Windsor Castle is unique because it is the only imperial copy dating to Shah Jahan's reign which is illustrated.

Having said that, the audience for this manuscript would have been very limited. Only a few people would have had access to an imperial manuscript such as this. You've got to remember that at the Mughal court, wall paintings or murals would have functioned more like Western oil paintings with a much larger audience. Paintings and manuscripts like this had a very different function. These were much more personal. The idea behind this manuscript was perhaps more as a record for posterity, something to be handed down through the generations. It's a symbol of dynasty and authority.

This manuscript was presented to King George III at the end of the 18th century. Already by then, the authority of the Mughal emperor had dramatically diminished. And even the Agra Fort was in a great state of dilapidation.

Today, the manuscript is housed in the Royal Library at Windsor Castle. And it's an important reminder of a now vanished culture. This painting brings the Mughal court to life in a way that the text on its own cannot. It really evokes the spirit of one of the most powerful and the most opulent empires the world has ever known.