

Art in the edo and mughal period



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Art forms have differed widely across time periods as well as geographic location. Each culture had their reasoning for what and how they created the pieces of art in their time. Focusing on two completely different periods as well as the location can bring to the light these differences as well as their similarities. On the most eastern part of Asia, Japan, Kitagawa Utamaro depicted what he saw in the beauty of women, *bijin-ga ōkubi-e*, translated to portraits of beautiful women always shown from the torso up (Cumming, 2010). Moving across to India, patronized by his emperors, Jahangir and Shah Jahan, there was an emergence of Mughal art with Bichtir. Bichtir, as a result, created court paintings that depicted both as being dominant or in the act of something gracious or honorable (Seyller, 2003). Considering both of these artists' background, it is clear that the depiction of the human figure, whether it be for reasons of passion or patron, was an important subject matter during both the Edo and Mughal period and these paintings give insight to the artistic and cultural similarities as well as differences of these groups.

The Mughal and the Edo period are both defined by two different works of art. The first of these pieces, derived from the Mughal period, was painted by Bichtir. Bichtir, as stated previously, was a court painter for both Jahangir, and later Shah Jahan. This piece was commissioned by Jahangir, as apparent by the name, *Jahangir Preferring a Sufi Shaikh to Kings*. The subject matter here is Jahangir who is faced by four other men, Sufi Shaikh, Ottoman Sultan, King James I of England, and finally Bichtir. In this particular work, and with Mughal art in general, it is important to note the distinct size and position of each figure in the portrait. For instance, the central figure, Jahangir is

portrayed as both larger and higher up than the rest of the figures, denoting his greater importance. Likewise, the meaning behind the name of the painting is depicted as Jahangir gifts Sufi Shaikh with a book and the slightest grin. By interacting directly with the Shaikh, Jahangir is presenting his spiritual learning to the rest (Neave, 2015). Furthermore, the cartouches, on both the top and bottom margins, suggest that the Emperor favors visitation with a holy man over kings. The interaction also shows a distinction between the rich and the poor as well as pursuing material or spiritual quests through the sharp contrast between the gem-studded wrists and fingers of Jahangir and the bare hands of the Shaikh (Khan Academy). Following the hierarchical order, an Ottoman Sultan stands, distinguished by his clothing, as a foreigner joins his hands together in a respectful manner; thus, avoiding physical contact, a cultural taboo. The gesture exhibits both humility and respect as the Ottoman leader agreed upon using this manner of greeting in a country where he is a guest. The Shaikh exudes a similar principle in a less apparent manner; implied deference is represented by not accepting the book directly into his hands, but rather into his shawl. The third figure, King James I of England, draped in his European attire, appears more distinctive than the others while his pose and gaze convey that he is immodest and perhaps uneasy (Khan Academy). Last is Bichtir, the artist, who is shown wearing a yellow jama indicating that he is a Hindu in service at the Mughal court. He paints himself bowing towards his Emperor in humble gratitude; to emphasize his humility, his signature is placed under the stool of the Emperor to which he would step onto in order to take his seat.

Other than King James I, pieces of European iconography have been incorporated to show the influence and acceptance of Europeans and their culture into their country. The most obvious are the putti, the small angel-like figures suspended towards the top, but they provide minimal clues to the purpose or meaning. The putto on the left wields a bow with a broken string and a bent arrow, while the one on the right covers his face with his hands (Khan Academy). There is no one answer to why they are shown as such, the same is for the multi-headed figure kneeling at the base of Jahangir's stool. The symbols not derived from European culture are the crouching angels beneath the stool and the halo surrounding Jahangir. Beneath the stool, the angels write a Persian saying at the base of the hourglass that alludes to time while the halo shows the divinity, emperorship, and a visual manifestation of his honor.

Mughal style has changed at the reigns of Jahangir as he preferred court scenes and portraits rather than the emphasis on book illustration that was given before. Jahangir was influenced by European painting, and encouraged paintings depicting the happenings in his own life, and individual portraits. This style thrived on elegance and richness through technical advancement in the brushwork, a less crowded composition, subdued colors, and a less dynamic movement (Britannica, 2014). A blending of Persian and Indian ideas occurred, followed by a greater interest in realistic portraiture rather than the typical form of Persian miniatures (Boundless).

Kitagawa Utamaro painted the second of the two pieces, derived from the Edo period titled, *Three Beauties of the Present Day*. This print follows his fascination with the subject matter of women and feminine beauty. In

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contrast to most of the work done in this subject matter, the names, as well as the family affiliation, is known about the three women depicted. It was common for Utamaro to use nameless women, only captured as a standard of beauty. The three women were famous for their beauty in the city of Edo, the middle and most eminent being Tomimoto Tehina, to the right is Naniwa Whales, and last being Takashima Nisa (Azarenka). Utamaro, rather than capturing a realistic portrait of the three women, idealizes their characteristics to create what he saw best. To most the portraits of the ladies look almost identical and most Utamaro's prints at the time would evoke the same opinion; however, there are subtle differences that may be discovered such as the shapes of the eyes, mouth, or nose. Other than what Utamaro was trying to express through the beauty of these women, there is little meaning behind the works of art.

Utamaro chose a style that depicted the ideal beauty in women, but even so, he flourished and was able to use the same characters and models in various prints while portraying the same meaning (Waterhouse). The technique used in all of these prints is a type of Japanese multi-colored woodblock printing called Nishiki-e; it is also known as Edo-e, denoting to Edo (Khan Academy). The print came black and white and needed fine brush strokes as they were hand painted with the addition of one- or two-color ink blocks. Doing so led to prints that were more realistic and expressive with a subtle range of colors.

Through the descriptions of both works, it becomes more apparent that the subject matter and style, although at face value are very different, have characteristics that are similar. The subject matter of human figures was

imperative, one being an emperor with kings and the other three beautiful women. Despite this, both portraits show an idealized version of the central figure or figures with subtle key details creating this ideal setting. The use of these subtle portrayals such as body and face details, posture, and position are all used to convey a certain meaning while one is political and the other social. Likewise, the style used incorporates similarities such as the use of a small range of, but subdued colors, and fine brush stroke helping to create the texture necessary for the depiction of human form. These depictions were becoming more realistic focusing on the subject matter over other background details or scenes. However, as stated previously, the reasoning behind the creation of the pieces are completely different, with few similarities, exemplifying the cultural and artistic differences in the time periods of the Mughals and Edo.

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