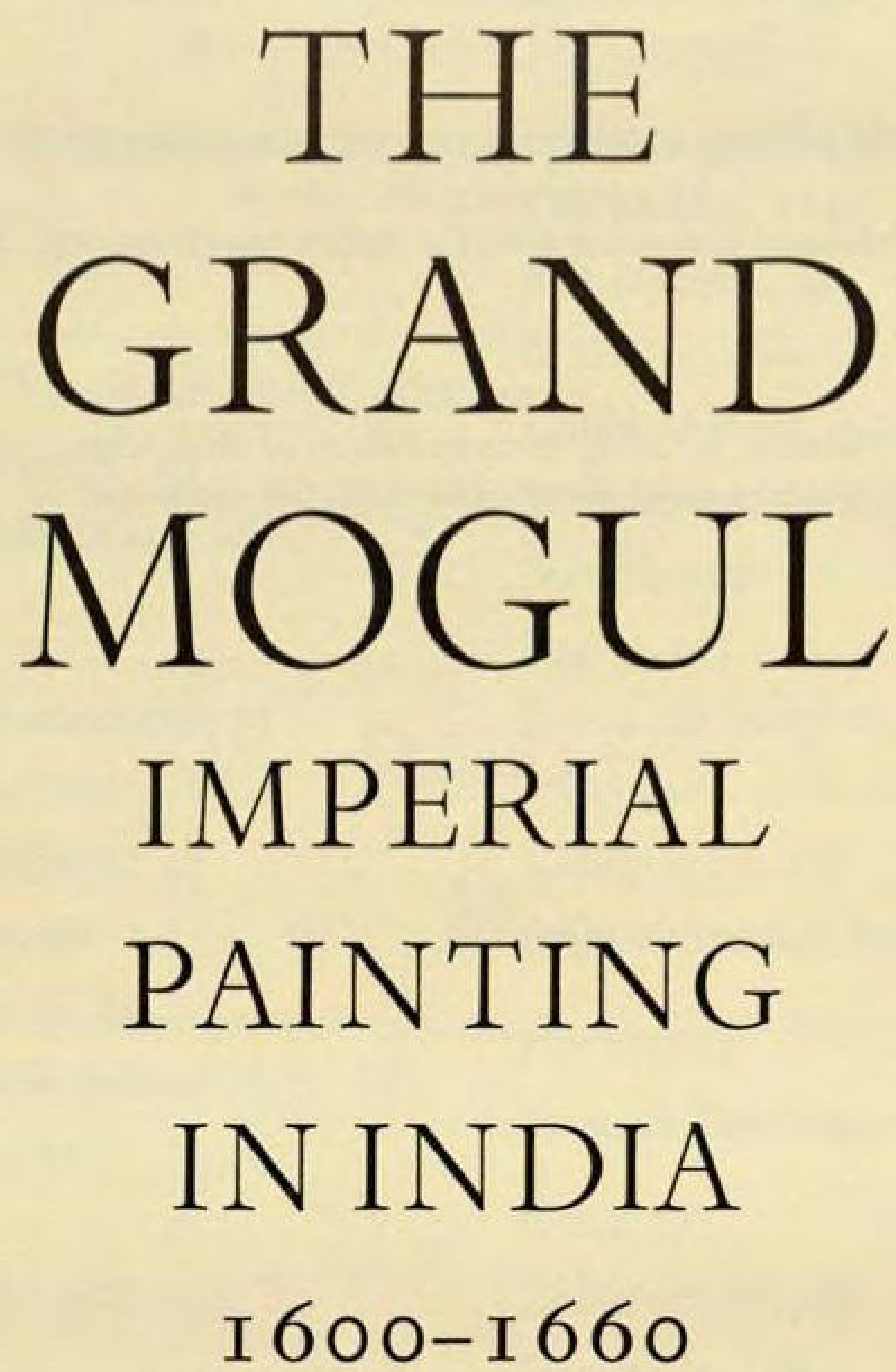

THE GRAND MOGUL

IMPERIAL PAINTING IN INDIA 1600–1660

By Milo Cleveland Beach

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY
STUART CARY WELCH AND GLENN D. LOWRY

Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute · Williamstown, Massachusetts

Indira Gandhi National
Centre for the Arts

This catalogue accompanies an exhibition held at the
Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts
between September 25 and November 5, 1978
at the Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Maryland
between November 20, 1978 and January 10, 1979
at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Massachusetts
between February 2 and March 25, 1979
and at the Asia House Gallery, New York City
between April 19 and June 10, 1979.

The exhibition and catalogue were substantially aided
by a generous grant from the
National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

COVER:
Shamsa, probably from an Album of Shah Jahan
circa 1640–50, detail of *no. 21* in this catalogue.

759.954
BEA

Copyright © 1978 by the
Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts
All rights reserved
Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 77-99260
International Standard Book Number: ISBN 0-931102-01-4
Manufactured in the United States of America

Indira Gandhi National
Centre for the Arts

had access to his painters during this imprisonment; he may also have used the time to piece together the *Pādshāh-nāma* manuscript, a portion of which is presently in the Royal Library at Windsor (*nos. 24–26*). Aurangzēb was not particularly interested in any of the arts. An intensely austere portrait (*no. 67*), perhaps done at the time of his coronation, shows us the man who ruled from 1658 to 1707. The latter half of this reign was spent in the Deccan, where he remained until his death, trying vainly to control the various kingdoms and predatory bands that inhabited the region and threatened his control. In doing this, he exhausted a treasury already weakened by the extravagance of his father. And the length of his rule assured that his sons would be incompetent successors, for Aurangzēb was eighty-nine when he died, and his successor, Muhammad Shāh ᶜĀlam Bahādur, at sixty-four, had never held any major responsibility. A quick turnover of generally untrained, irresponsible rulers followed, together with a thick growth of power factions, court intrigues, and the like. The unalleviated decline of the Mughal Empire, which really began at Akbar's death in 1605, formally ended in 1858. The last token emperor was exiled to Burma by the British in that year, and Her Majesty Queen Victoria became Empress of India. A quite different imperial tradition then began.

Aurangzēb

CHARACTERISTICS OF MUGHAL PAINTING

IT was under Akbar that a recognizable Mughal style was formed. While the emperor placed the Iranians Mīr Sayyid ᶜAlī and ᶜAbd as-Samad in charge of the Mughal painting studios, the works that emerged were in a new and different style which mixed Hindu (Rājput) and Muslim Indian elements with those of imperial Safavid Iran. Initially, all these ingredients seemed to be on equal footing. Iranian traits, of course, reflected the attitudes and taste with which the Mughals were most familiar; the Indian styles, however, appealed because of their novelty. With a limited palette of intense colors, little regard for fineness of technique, and immediately legible, often violently exciting compositions, they formed a contrast to the ultrasophistication and subtlety of Iranian works, in which colors were set onto the page like jewels in mounts and high drama conveyed by the raising of an eyebrow. Akbar, a youth himself, athletic and strong willed, forced the creation of a style of painting as full of physical exuberation as the life he led.

Painting under Akbar

Again, however, we are not here investigating the delights of Akbar period painting, and it must suffice simply to point out that as Akbar grew older, the paintings he demanded became subtler in composition, technique, and emotional range. He also became increasingly concerned with images of the world around him. His "invention" of portraiture, and the shift of subject away from the religious and poetic texts common to both Hindu and Muslim traditions and towards historical scenes and natural history subjects are major innovations of Akbari painting. By refinements of physical materials, Mughal painters were able to investigate the natural world in ever greater detail; by experience with new techniques of modelling, they were able to give physical substance and verity to forms; and by breaking into new ideas of the human being as a unique individual (by far the hardest development, for it involved the recognition of a completely different *weltanschauung*), they brought painting out of other-worldly realms.

Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts

FIG. 1. An Elephant. Deccani, at Ahmadnagar, ca. 1590–95. Private Collection.

From the late sixteenth century into the mid-seventeenth, Mughal painting concentrated on naturalism, and, in particular, on portraiture. This is a brief moment of a few decades in a tradition of, at most, three hundred years, but it has served to define Mughal painting for most viewers. A quick comparison of three different paintings of the same subject—an elephant—from three different contemporary cultural complexes in India, should help to make the unorthodoxy of the Mughal style more evident.

The Deccani style

Figure 1 from Ahmadnagar in the Deccan is in a non-Mughal Muslim Indian style very close to contemporary Iranian taste. It is a tense, superbly controlled drawing, full of vitality. The aliveness is less due to the subject than to the line, which, by twisting and turning, becoming thicker and thinner, forces our eyes continually to move over the surface. Such details as the bottom of the saddle cloth show us that the line, while suggestive of particular objects, moves quite independently of them. It is the rhythm of the line, not that of the saddle cloth, that we observe. In this way, too, the elephant becomes a generalized type; the painter's interest is not in showing a specific elephant in a particular spatial setting.

A second example (*figs. 2* and *3*) is Hindu, a painting made for one of the Rājput rājās under Mughal overlordship. The brilliance of linework and whatever sense of modelling and corporeality exists, are perhaps due to lessons learned from the Deccani and Mughal styles. However, despite the slight indication of ground, this painting, too, is a general type.

Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts

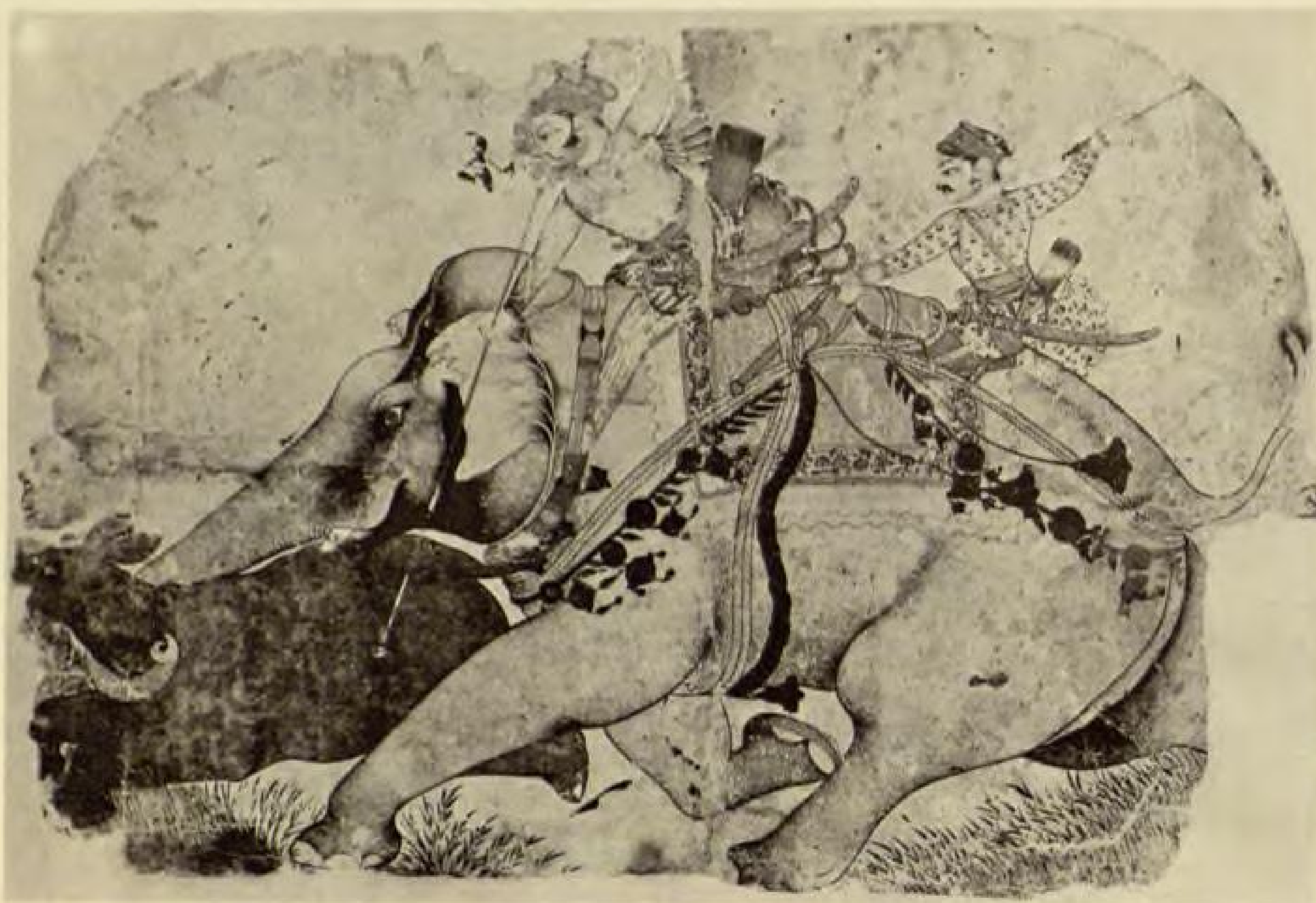

FIG. 2. A Rhinoceros Hunt. Rājput, Rajasthani, at Kota, ca. 1700. Private Collection.

FIG. 3. Detail of Fig. 2.

The Rājput style

The saddle cloth is a superb, strongly colored shape, but tells us nothing of the substance of the cloth. A better detail, for our purposes here, is the eye (*fig. 3*), which swims through the head like a fish, chased, perhaps, by the wavelike ear. Such verbalization tends to kill, through suggestions of specificity, the intended generalized metaphors; but over and over again, in Hindu poetics, one encounters the idea that the subject of a work of art is to be presented in its most generalized form. Other forms and emotions, suggested much less explicitly than the earlier words implied, make the viewer aware of the degree to which every element in the universe is interrelated, part of one substance. Such a sensibility is what the Hindu artist working for a Hindu patron almost never alters; and despite the superficial Mughalization of the style seen here, it is this which makes it impossible for this work to be mistaken for a purely Mughal painting.

The Mughal example is *no. 33*, and it presents a specific elephant. The saddle cloth is the texture and weight of the material. Line does not "take-off," but transforms itself into what is being described. Every element of the picture, including the relatively naturalistic space, is meant to emphasize the uniqueness of the subject, not its universality. Within both Indian and Muslim contexts, this is a radical change of outlook.

The Mughal interest in nature

Between approximately 1600 and 1660, the time span of this exhibition, Mughal painters concentrated on perfecting the techniques of naturalism. Akbar's earlier enthusiasms had been worked through, and Hindu paintings, it was now believed, provided neither the perfection of technique nor the naturalistic attitudes that the older Akbar demanded. Persian works and European prints were deemed appropriate models—and remained so throughout the further development of the Mughal style. By the 1660s, however, the Emperor Aurangzēb (r. 1658–1707), Akbar's great-grandson, like his predecessor Tahmāsp, withdrew from active artistic patronage, and many Mughal painters moved to the employ of provincial governors

Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts

and nobles. Because these men were often in contact with, and receptive to, Hindu India in ways that the imperial court was not, later Mughal provincial styles—unlike the contemporary imperial tradition—are often exciting, challenging, and innovative.

Hindu India

It is necessary to remember that as the imperial style of painting withdrew further and further from the interests and attitudes of Hindu India (which it did steadily from the later sixteenth century), it simply cut off its own sustenance; for Hindu India was the country in which the Mughals lived. The history of later imperial Mughal painting is a story of heavy blossoms supported by shallow roots.

The years between 1600 and 1660 are approximately those of the mature Mughal style: earlier years led to the achievements of these decades, and later years sought to revive them. It is this classic moment that is being investigated in this exhibition.

PAINTING UNDER JAHĀNGĪR

As regards myself, my liking for painting and my practice in judging it have arrived at such a point that when any work is brought before me, either of deceased artists or those of the present day, without the names being told me, I say on the spur of the moment that it is the work of such and such a man. And if there be a picture containing many portraits, and each face be the work of a different master, I can discover which face is the work of each of them. If any other person has put in the eye and eyebrow of a face, I can perceive whose work the original face is, and who has painted the eye and eyebrows.[1]

Jahāngīr's taste

EMPEROR Jahāngīr's confidence in his own visual acuity seems amply confirmed by the extraordinary quality of the works he commissioned. Unlike Akbar, who often demanded large books of both historical and poetic subject matter, Jahāngīr virtually ignored the historical, and made immediately evident his preference for small books with fewer, and thereby often finer, illustrations. Akbar's taste in the 1590s—a period which seems to be the major culmination of earlier wide-ranging and experimental stylistic developments—was for compositions tightly packed with figures and action. Manuscripts had many illustrated folios, and it was accepted, for large manuscripts, to have one painter design a composition and another do the actual painting, often with a third to add specific details, such as particular portraits. The sheer quantity of painting, and the assembly line procedure, worked to level both the quality of the painting produced and its artistic range. And this is a major problem of the later Akbar period style.

The general character of Jahāngīrī painting is quite different. Scenes are simpler and more spacious, and the predominant interest in narrative action is replaced by an investigation of the intensity of human interrelationships. Too, joint responsibility for single illustrations was discouraged, and paintings thereby became unified expressions of individual artistic sensibilities. It is tempting to attribute these changes to the change of imperial patron, yet all the elements of Jahāngīrī painting are present within the Akbar period;[2] moreover, the new trends take on major importance in the imperial studio about 1600, at a time when Jahāngīr was in rebellion and living independently in Allahabad. Thus, whether the new selectivity of subject and style was the result of early influences exerted by Jahāngīr as a prince, or of a

Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts