

Transcription BOC2 Curatorial Film

The exhibition, "Building Our Collection: Safavid and Mughal Albums," showcases the historical and artistic significance of MIA's collection of miniature paintings and calligraphy from India and Iran.

In this exhibition we look at how and why great collections of Islamic art are assembled, we examine the artistic and technical brilliance of the objects on display and how they are conserved. And we show how Mughal and Safavid albums are invaluable tools for research, shedding light on historical art production, intercultural exchange and the importance of art to the projection of imperial legitimacy.

The many departments of the museum all contribute to our understanding of the objects in MIA's collection. The curatorial team, for instance, are experts at researching the historical context of Islamic artwork.

This part of the exhibition focuses on the history of collecting miniature paintings and calligraphy. There exists a long history of collecting these objects in the Islamic world. The creation and compiling of albums, or *muraqqa'at*, began at the Timurid court of Herat in the 15th century. The items on display here emanate primarily from the Safavid period in Iran, which spanned the 16th and 17th centuries, and the Mughal period in India.

The Mughal dynasty ruled South Asia from 1526 until 1858. They were one of the wealthiest and most powerful dynasties in the world at the time, and they were great patrons of the arts. A Mughal miniature painting is considered a prized collector's item to this day.

This is a portrait of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, and he is considered the last of the great Mughal emperors. He is a very interesting figure. He took the Mughal Empire to its greatest geographical extent. One very interesting thing about Aurangzeb is that he is considered to have disbanded the Mughal artistic workshop. So it is very interesting that we have a portrait of him from relatively early in his reign where he is dressed in full court regalia. In Mughal iconography, holding a flywhisk like this – this is a flywhisk that he has in his hand here - was a sign of your kingly and imperial right to rule. So this object is important because it overturns some of our ideas about Aurangzeb as a ruler, that he wasn't concerned with painting and portraiture and the arts, because obviously if he commissioned this, he must have been concerned to some level with the kind of image that he was projecting. These objects give us much greater insight into the past, which is one of the many reasons why we collect them and preserve them.

The most interesting thing about this painting really is not so much its subject matter, which is again quite a standard portrait of a powerful figure, but the fact that the portrait was owned by a British collector in India. So the owner of this painting was Sir Elijah Impey who was the British Chief Justice of Bengal from 1774 to 1782. Throughout the exhibition we look into why and how these albums of beautiful images were compiled, and we tend to focus more on Persia and India. However it's very interesting that the British, when they were in India during the colonial period, adapted these same

practices, and they also started commissioning works of art from local Indian artists, and collecting works of art and compiling them in to their own albums in emulation of the Indian elites. MIA's collection of Safavid and Mughal album folios reflects this rich history of connoisseurship and artistic appreciation.

The research of conservators contributes to understanding the material qualities and historical production methods of the objects on display and is essential to understanding the methods used to create the objects. .

This large scale painting stands out with the use of a particular pigment which was specifically encountered in the Mughal school from the second part of the 16th century onwards. The so-called peori, or Indian yellow, was manufactured from the urine of cows intrusively fed with mango leaves and water. The urine was collected, cooked on a fire, filtered to obtain the sediment, which was shaped and dried into balls of pigment. The process was declared inhuman and outlawed in 1908 by the British, as the cows were extremely undernourished and the mango leaves contained a toxic substance which was poisoning them. The pigment can be clearly identified by using ultraviolet light. As seen on these images, it shows a characteristic bright yellow fluorescence. Scientific methods like this allow us to better understand the materiality of these objects and the historical context of their production. All of this information is essential to increase the body of knowledge of our collection. Artistic and technical research allows us to better contextualise this object historically and geographically. From the conservation perspective, understanding the materials and the technique is part of the decision making process for treatment development.

MIA's documentation specialists provide expert knowledge on the collecting history of the objects on display here. Knowing where an object was made and which collections it used to belong to helps us to understand both its historical and artistic importance.

The interesting aspect of manuscripts is that we can understand and analyse ownership and therefore provenance of manuscripts through stamps, through archives and through inscriptions. Here we have an example of stamps in this manuscript. This manuscript is the Bustan of Sa'di, and here we have a very interesting royal seal of the Deccan, where it is possible to read Sulayman Jah and a date also, which is 1232 [AH]. Through stamps and inscriptions as well as archives here, we understand that the provenance is significant to understanding the object's life, but more importantly it shows through each owner a unique way of collecting.

By highlighting the contributions of MIA's curators, conservators, and documentation specialists to understanding the history of the Mughal and Safavid albums on display here, we hope that we have provided greater insight into how the museum builds, researches and preserves its collection of Islamic art.