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An investigation into the representation of floral patterns in Mughal Indian Art

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Abstract

The world witnessed some of the most magnificent works of art, architecture, and craftsmanship throughout the Slave dynasty's 235-year rule, between 1526 to 1761, most of it inspired by the natural world, especially under Jahangir and Shah Jahan. In Indian Mughal art, flora and fauna are frequently shown. When the Mughal Empire was on its height. On the other hand, it is stated that Akbar, Babur, and Humayun all shared a love of gardens and flowers. Babur's first deed in India was to construct the Charbagh, a garden that subsequently rose to fame under the Mughal era. Through this research, the researcher has focused in particular on examining how flora and fauna are used in artefacts, architecture and carpet, produced during the Mughal era.

Keywords: *Flora and Fauna, Mughal Art, Miniature Painting, Mughal Architecture, Craftsmanship.*

Introduction

The Delhi Sultanate reigned over most of the Indian subcontinent before the emergence of the Mughal Empire. Miniature painting has been developing in many places since the 10th century, and it flourished in numerous regional courts throughout the Sultanate of Delhi. When Humayun, the second Mughal emperor, returned from exile, he took two renowned Persian artists – Mir Sayyid Ali and Abd al-Samad – with him. These Persian artists created numerous notable paintings, notably the 'Khamsa of Nizami,' based on Humayun's directions. These

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paintings strayed from traditional Persian art, resulting in the birth of a new art form known as 'Mughal Painting.' Subsequent Mughal kings expanded on the Mughal artwork.

The Mughals' luxurious and leisurely lifestyle gave their entire collection and inventiveness a beautiful and opulent appearance. They enthusiastically embraced the use of natural plants, birds, and animals to adorn textiles and decorative art surfaces. The natural world's images were used for aesthetic purposes. With the fusion of their regional styles, Mughal designs feature traces of Persian art. The designs made under Jahangir's reign have a strong Persian influence, yet they differ from the original. The motifs are arranged in patterns with vertical and horizontal axes of repetition among clusters of blossoms and leaves. Strong compositions with artistic expression are featured in the designs. Floral themes, niches, and colorful birds adorned pictorial carpets from 1590 to 1600. The combo features a well-balanced composition, appealing bloom patterns, scrolling vines, and a variety of lovely birds arranged in asymmetrical yet lifelike formations.

Living things and humans were not supposed to be shown in Islamic art, flower motifs were prominent in Mughal paintings. As a result, the plant kingdom produced subjects that were both non-controversial and stylable. Flowers have always been important in South Asian art, but probably never more so than in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Mughal Empire, which was founded in 1526 when Zahr al-Dn Muhammad Babur (1483-1530), a descendant of Genghis Khan and Timur the Great from Fergana in what is now Uzbekistan, conquered Delhi and Agra, expanded to encompass all but the southernmost reaches of the Indian Subcontinent before gradually declining in favour of numerous local centres of power that carried on and adapted its cultural heritage, slowly declined in favour of numerous local centres of power that carried.

Mughal art and architecture developed new styles beginning with Emperor Jahangir's reign (r. 1625-1627), less reliant on earlier models from both Central Asia and India itself, and imbued with a distinct form of realism that would be reflected in various ways throughout the region for the next two centuries. Jahangir was known for his deep love of plants and animals, and his court painter Mansur was regularly commissioned to create elaborate and scientifically correct paintings of the monarch's flora and fauna collections. Sadly, just a few of Mansur's botanical investigations have survived to this day. Flowering plants, on the other hand, began to appear more frequently – as the subject of sophisticated painterly studies in their own right, such as those by Mansur, and in the lush garden settings of many a painted scene, but also as ornamental patterns in the margins of miniatures or calligraphy; adorning walls as murals, pietra dura inlay or mirror work, or carved in relief; printed, woven, or embroidered on textiles; carved into jade or rock.

Humayun (r. 1530- 40; 55- 56), the second Mughal emperor, is frequently represented wearing a conspicuous feather as a hat adornmentⁱ. Humayun's fascination and enjoyment of nature may also be seen in literary sources, as his servant describes an instance in 1543 when a particularly beautiful bird was captured and the emperor ordered its portrait to be paintedⁱⁱ. Paintings were created during the reign of Akbar, the third Mughal emperor (r. 1556-1605), particularly the well-known Hamzanama folios, which were created between 1556 and 1565.ⁱⁱⁱ, are loaded with nicely drawn deciduous trees and vivid pictures of flowers in bloom and numerous birds and forest animals in green settings. At this stage of development, the serving containers in the Hamzanama often feature inherited forms of earlier Islamic metal and glassware traditions, with minimal floral design and occasional animal heads portrayed as terminal themes. Floral design is also absent from dagger and sword hilts, as the majority of weapons appear to be Turkish or Persian in origin and thus belong to a separate tradition. On the other hand, floral arabesques are frequently found on sheaths, scabbards, shields, and quivers. It was during Jahangir's reign (r. 1605- 27) that the Mughal ornamental arts emerged as a fully developed form of artistic expression replete with floral imagery^{iv}.

Shahjahan (r. 1628-58) not only carried on his father's love of floral imagery in his ornamental arts but also formalized formal portraiture of blossoming plants as a dynasty leitmotif that would last for the next two centuries. The naturalistic depictions of noble animals popular in Akbari and Jahangir paintings were also adapted for use in the ornamental arts during this time. The emperor was particularly fond of nephrite jade dagger hilts with horse and antelope heads, with his well-known drinking cup from 1657/58 in the Victoria & Albert Museum often regarded as the most accomplished^v. The plant and wildlife imagery utilized in the decorative arts became increasingly stylized and, at times, degenerative beginning around the end of Aurangzeb's long reign and progressing through the reigns of the later Mughal monarchs. The floral sprays gracing a magnificent jade mirror back from circa 1675-1700 appear rigid in comparison to the lyrically elegant flowers adorning the Taj Mahal (1632-43), despite the high quality of the craftsmanship and overall design unanimously considered as the most accomplished (Fig-1 and 2).



Figure 1, Leaf-shaped mirror (back View). Mughal, circa 1675- 1700. Light green nephrite jade. Rock trace of gilding; 16.5x9.2x 0.3 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Figure 2, Dagger (Khanjar) of Aurangzeb Mughal, dated 1660/61 (AH 1071). Light green and burnt orange nephrite jade hilt, steel blade inlaid with gold; 34.9x 5.6cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Figure 3, Dagger (Khanjar) and sheath Mughal, circa 1675 - 1700. White nephrite jade hilt and sheath fittings inlaid with foiled Rubies, emeralds, and diamonds set in gold; steel blade; velvet-covered wooden sheath. Los Angeles County Museum of Art



Figure 4, Perfume bottle. Delhi, circa 1800. Silver, gold, and turquoise with clear and colored glass; 8.9x 4.4x 2.2 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

After Aurangzeb, the decorative arts suffered a qualitative decline due to political instability and the cataclysmic raid on Delhi in 1739 by the Persian king Nadir Shah (r. 1736-47), which prompted a mass exodus of artists to flourishing regional courts such as Lucknow and the Rajasthan and Punjab Hills. The stalled innovation of the late Mughal ornamental arts was exacerbated by the overall dramatic decrease in skill and materials evident in the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries. It's understandable, and it may have been unavoidable in the end.

Flora and Fauna Decorative Motifs on a personal object

There were various basic uses of flora and animal motifs in the ornamental arts during the Mughal Empire. The priority was ornamentation, which served both decorative and dynastic identification reasons. Dagger and sword hilts, sheaths, and scabbards were the most popular and common court goods to be embellished with floral motifs, along with jewellery. A dagger hilt of white jade with inlaid diamond and ruby blossoms and emerald leaves is one example of using foliate designs to announce a Mughal origin (Fig-3). By the conclusion of the Mughal Empire, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Flowering plant's dynastic emblem had devolved into a repeating pattern with far less aesthetic value than the exquisite blossoms of the seventeenth century. Despite this, it continued to perform its original purpose of dynastic identification. This is vividly seen on a perfume bottle from circa 1800, which exhibits the

design in its mature form but is still easily recognized (Fig-4). The significance of flora and fauna imagery in deciding the overall external shape of a vessel, sword hilt, or other luxury object was perhaps the most distinctive usage of flora and fauna imagery in Mughal ornamental art. Not only were natural shapes blended to create works of art, such as the 1657/58 drinking cup or Shahjahan mentioned earlier, but some types of things were wholly inspired by a single plant or animal. Ivory powder priming flasks in the shape of an antelope are the most well-known Mughal decorative artifacts that take their overall inspiration from an animal (Fig- 5)



Figure 5, Powder primer flask (barud-dan). Mughal 17th century. Ivory with gilt metal spanner; (7.3 x 21.0 x31.0 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Figure 6, Gold spoon set with diamonds, rubies, and emeralds, about 1600, Mughal. Museum no. IM.173-1910. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Flora and fauna in Mughal Carpets

Mughal palace carpets from the 16th century, in particular, display Safavid influence in their design compositions. For woven carpets, rows of wildflowers with petals and leaves on a bright red backdrop were favoured. Despite the flowers' blossoms being weaved in white, yellow, and blue threads and generally set against beautiful red backdrops, the overall impression is of a real garden, with flowers planted in straight rows and grouped on a central

axis. These garden carpets are among the most impressive Mughal karkhana achievements, achieving an acceptable aesthetic balance between floral themes drawn from nature and the demands of the woven medium, in which decorative components must be repeated regularly.



Figure 7, Mughal Carpet with flora and fauna dated 16th Century, collection^{vi}



Figure 8, Detail of Mughal carpet inspired by Safavid design, collection by Metropolitan Museum of Art^{vii}.

Flora and animals became the two most important components of design in Mughal carpets as a result of the Islamic hostility to the human figure. Carpet weaving under the Mughals was characterized by realistically rendered flowers and vegetation, as well as creatures depicted in a dynamic, active style. Emperor Akbar encouraged carpet weaving as a unique and independent craft, as he did many other arts and crafts. In the *Aine-Akbari*, Abul Fazl asserts unequivocally that Akbar hired expert carpet weavers to begin the looms in Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, and Lahore. Before the end of his reign (1605), the carpets made on these looms were comparable in quality and diversity to those made on the royal looms. Emperor Akbar encouraged carpet weaving as a unique and independent craft, as he did many other arts and crafts. In the *Aine-Akbari*, Abul Fazl asserts unequivocally that Akbar hired expert carpet weavers to begin the looms in Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, and Lahore. Before the conclusion of his reign (1605), the carpets made on these looms were on par with the products of Persia's famed centers of Goshkan (Joshagan), Khujestan, Kerman, and Sabzwar in terms of quality and diversity. This was essentially a court craft in Mughal India, catering solely to the demands of the court and nobles. The quality, size, style, and worth of a Mughal carpet were therefore determined by the court's preferences.

Aside from carpets, human nature is always drawn to gorgeous clothing and fabric designs. The textiles of the Mughals are a reflection of royal life and a measure of taste, presenting cultural perception through the courts, audience halls, and throne rooms. The lavishly embroidered exquisite garments demonstrate their special taste for the kings' and nobles' opulent lifestyles. Their outfits were adorned with a combination of varied motifs, brilliant colors, a distinctive fabric surface, and skilled stitching with precious and semi-precious stones on detailed garments. Mughal royal family members wore wonderful and expensive costumes stitched in magnificent design with excellent fabrics such as silks, velvets, and brocades, and they also adorned themselves with costly jewels from head to toe.

FLORA AND FAUNA IN MUGHAL ARCHITECTURE

Mughal architecture is a distinct Indo-Islamic architectural style that flourished in northern and central India from the 16th to the 18th centuries under the patronage of Mughal monarchs. It's a stunningly symmetrical and ornate blend of Persian, Turkish, and Indian architecture. The Mughals were also known for developing beautiful gardens in the Persian Charbagh style, in which the quadrilateral grounds were divided into four smaller sections by walkways or flowing water.

Flora was an important aspect of Mughal life, with her presence evident in the design of palaces, forts, and graves. Without trees, plants, and running water, a Mughal habitat would be difficult to imagine. Mughal architecture is more than just brick, stone, and mortar; it also values topography and the environment, which includes gardens with watercourses, water bodies, and open space. Babur was familiar with the renowned gardens and Charbagh, palaces, mosques, and mausoleums of the Central Asian and Persian worlds, thanks to his roots in Farghana and Samarqand and his constant wanderings through Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and northern Persia. His poetic worldview and understanding of Persian poetry, including works by Firdausi, Sa'di, Hafiz, Nizami, and Khayyam, as well as his fascination with nature, were reflected in his ideals of beauty. Bagh-e-Gul Afshan and Bagh-e-Zar Afshan are two of Agra's surviving gardens^{viii}.

A palace or tomb was no longer exhibited in isolation, but rather through the garden, which had tree avenues and flower parterres, stone-paved water channels, stone tanks, cascades, and raised causeways, all of which were symmetrically organized as an essential part of the overall layout. The ancient Hindus created gardens ranging in size from the little Vatika to the huge udyana, but the architecture was rarely related to gardens, water features, or landscapes until the Mughals.

For architectural ornamentation, the Mughals used a wide range of designs, including arabesques, geometrical patterns, calligraphy panels, and floral motifs. Both natural and stylized floral arrangements have been used. While the Mughal artist's normal preference is to utilize a stylized floral pattern, and stylization of forms is the primary topic of Mughal ornamentation, vegetation has sometimes been depicted in its natural twists and turns without stylization. The dados of Fatehpur Sikri's Kutub-Khanah (so-called Sultana's Palace) are carved in red sandstone and portray jungle sceneries and natural flora and fauna. On one panel, three trees with luxuriant flora are depicted in their natural state, with no stylization (fig- 9). Another displays a jungle scene with three lions (now mutilated) and five parrots (also mutilated but identifiable); two birds perched on a twig, two on tree branches, and one soaring (Fig- 10).

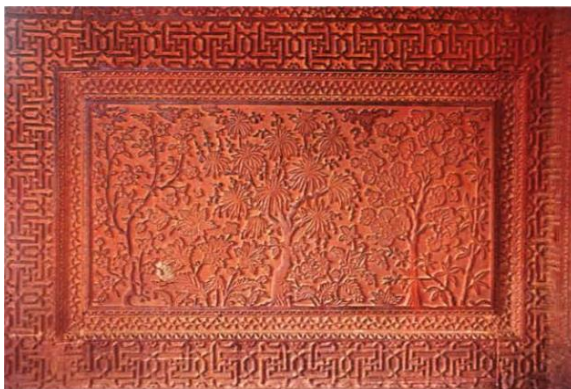


Figure 9, Dado depicting flora, Kutub Khanah annex (so-called Sultana's Palace), Fatehpur Sikri.



Figure 10, Dado depicting flora and fauna, Kutub-Khanah annex (Sultana's Palace), Fatehpur Sikri.

The Jami Masjid's mihrabs (niches) have been decorated with plants in natural forms^{ix} and, more strikingly, on the dados of Fatehpur Sikri's mausoleum of Salim Chishti (fig- 11). There is no doubt that these plants have been portrayed as a subject on the entire panel. Beautiful wild flora has also been displayed on the tomb's arches^x. There is no doubt that these plants have been portrayed as a subject on the entire panel. Beautiful wild flora has also been displayed on the tomb's arches^{xi} Mansur painted a wide range of natural history topics, including more than a hundred birds, animals, plants, and flowers from Kashmir alone^{xii}. His paintings had a huge influence on architectural decorators, who were motivated to transpose Mansur's works onto the exterior and interior surfaces of buildings, especially the dados.

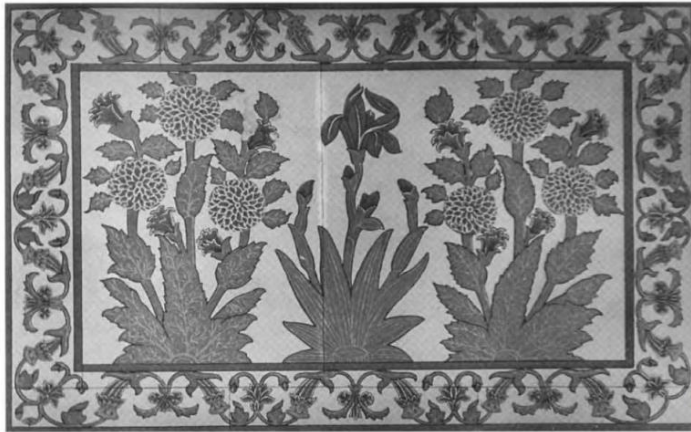


Figure 11, Dado depicting flora, Salim Chishti's Tomb Fatehpur Sikri.

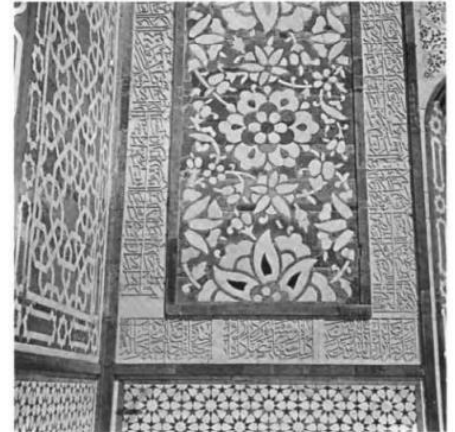


Figure 12, North Iwan of the main gateway, Akbar's tomb, Sikandra. Agra

The tomb of Itimad ud-Daula in Agra is probably the most profusely ornamented building of the Mughals. Constructed entirely of white marble, it has inlay and mosaic designs on the exterior and designs in painting and stucco in the interior. Highly stylized arabesque, geometrical, and floral designs have been used on all external surfaces. Some compositions depict wine cups, wine bottles (suraliis), and flower vases (Guldastas)^{xiii} and sometimes the motif of the cypress tree has also been used with them in an altogether stylized form^{xiv} (Figure 12).

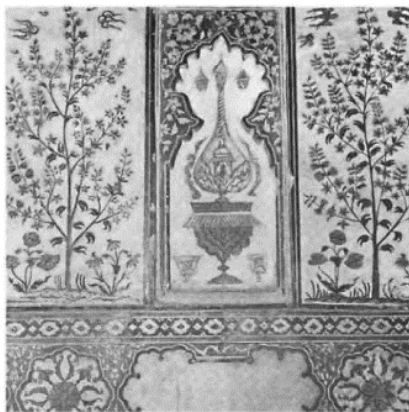


Figure 13, Natural plants from the tomb of Itimad ud-Daula, Agra



Figure 14, Dado. Muthamman Burj, Agra fort

It's worth noting that the goal of depicting real flora and stylized flower designs on a mural panel was the same: to create a lovely scene or composition for aesthetic pleasure. Soon after, it was determined that the simplest way to achieve this was to use a natural plant theme (a painting by Ustad Mansur) in the center of a dado, with a repeated stylized creeper bordering it on all sides. Some of the earliest examples of his representation can be found in the dados of the Musamman Burj in Agra Fort (1628-35). They have a stylized creeper pattern made of

flowers and leaves in inlay in polychrome, and double plant motifs in natural forms, one above the other, carved in the middle in medium relief (Fig- 14).

Mughal painters had previously utilized it on carved stucco paintings in the vestibule of Akbar's tomb and on the bases of the Agra Fort's Diwan-i Khas pillars. The Taj Mahal's ghata-pallava (purna-Kumbha or purna-kalasha) motif is the most iconic representation of flora in Mughal architecture. Stylization takes control after that, and stylized floral motifs nearly entirely replace the earlier natural shapes. In Akbar's constructions at Agra Fort (1565-75) and Fatehpur Sikri, honeysuckle and knop-and-flower themes were used (1572- 85). The eastern court of the so-called Jahangiri Mahal complex of the Bengali Mahal in Agra Fort has a honeysuckle motif on the parapet. Palmette motifs may be found on the bases of the porch's pillars and pilasters. The honeysuckle and palmette design can also be found in the interior ornamentation of the palace's upper pavilions. Honeysuckle is represented on the apex of a number of ornamental arches in the Mahal-i-Ilahi (also known as Birbal's Palace) in Fatehpur Sikri, as well as in designs on mural panels. In the Panch Mahal, it is also employed on the capital of a pillar.

Flora and Fauna in Mughal Paintings

Mughal painting emerged from the Persian art of miniature painting with Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain influences, and was generally done as miniatures either as book illustrations or as standalone works. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, Mughal courts produced a hybrid of Persian and Indian styles. Various Mughal Emperors ruled India at the time when these paintings were created. Battles, legendary stories, hunting scenes, animals, royal life, mythology, and other subjects were frequently depicted in the paintings. This art form grew in popularity to the point where it was adopted by other Indian courts.

The usage and representation of the floral motif in Mughal art broke new ground. Flowers were a common element and an intrinsic part of the design in Indian art from the beginning, but it wasn't until the Mughal School that they became topics of paintings, rather than embellishments, and only from the beginning of the seventeenth century that they became subjects of paintings. The Mughal School's development of this genre must be seen in the context of the Mughal monarchs' interest in nature. In his memoirs, Babur (1526-30) painted a vivid picture of India's flowers. His botanical intricacies in his description are truly astounding. "It grows both red and white," he wrote of leaner (*Nerium odorum*, the oleander). It has five petals, the same as the peach flower. It's similar to a peach blossom, except it opens 14 or 15 blossoms all at once, giving the impression of one large flower when viewed from a distance.

Even though Jahangir lists over a hundred flower paintings by Mansur, only four are known to exist. Nonetheless, the little that is known about Mansur's brush may be used to create an album of rare floral drawings of extraordinary beauty. Mansur's seven flower species painted on a single folio provide witness to our artist's profound mark on natural history. The skilfully drawn branches with leaves, buds, and flowers in various configurations are perfect in representation^{xv}. The plain background in a high "buff" tint appears to be the most acceptable here. This folio appears to be a fragmented folio from the artist's sketchbook, comprising notes on the details of flowers, buds, leaves, and other elements captured on the spot. "Tulip" (about 1621) and "Iris" (approximately 1621) are two of Mansur's most famous flower paintings. The study of the tulip exemplifies his outstanding ability in floral painting (Fig- 16, 17, 18).



Figure 15, *Seven variations of Flower by Mansur, circa 1620. Gulshan Album, imperial Library), Teheran*



Figure 16, *Tulip, by Nadir ul Mansur. Circa 1621. 21.6x9.7 cm. Habibganj Collection. Maulana Azad Library. Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh*



Figure 17, *Iris and bird, by Nadir ul Mansur. Circa 1621. Nasiruddin Album, Imperial Library, Teheran*

Despite being a native of temperate Asia, the opium poppy is the most popular in Mughal decorative arts. On a more serious note, several Mughal monarchs, including Jahangir, were habitual users of opium. As a result, the poppy appears on water pipes regularly. The poppy can be found on Kashmir shawls, carpets, embroidered and block-printed clothing, and, of course, on the Taj Mahal and Itimad ud Daulah's walls. It also occurs as kannats or panels on tents, which were especially important to the Mughals due to their nomadic lifestyle, where tents acted as traveling palaces. Though it was not originally of Indian origin, the marigold or genda has long been a component of Indian flower symbolism, notably at nuptials and religious contexts. This flower can be found in brocades and miniatures from the Mughal Empire.

Conclusion

Indian art has a long history of producing fine art and handicrafts. The use of plants and animals in crafts, artwork, and architecture peaked throughout the Middle Ages. The Mughals considerably advanced it and patronised it to an unprecedented degree since they considered it as a symbol of imperial pride and good fortune. They were used to exchange private goods like daggers, swords, and miniatures with other countries as well as honorary presents for diplomatic purposes. The rulers, who found the idea of portraying themselves as intriguing and royal in many ways, may have contributed to the success of this era's art. They might use it as a terrific artistic tool to show off their bravery and achievements. While many flower designs in Mughal art were fictitious and frequently based on prints from Europe, certain flowers were well-liked and accurately depicted in nature. Among the most prevalent are the poppy, marigold, and narcissus, but larkspur, crocus, iris, and saffron are also widespread.

References:

ⁱ *Paintings executed during the reign of the third Mughal emperor, Akbar (r. 1556- 1605), especially the well-known Hamzanama folios from around 1556 to 1565, 5 are filled with detailed depictions of flowers in bloom and various fowl and forest animals in verdant settings with finely drawn deciduous trees. At this stage of development the serving vessels in the Hamzanama generally feature the inherited forms of earlier Islamic metal and glassware conventions with limited floral imagery and occasional animal heads portrayed as terminal motifs. Dagger and sword hilts also lack floral imagery, as the majority of weapons appear to be Turkish or Persian in origin and thus are derived from a different tradition. Sheaths, scabbards, shields, and quivers, however, are often adorned with floral arabesques.*

ⁱⁱ Jouher, *The Tezkereh al Vakiat or Private Memoirs of the Moghul Emperor Humayun*, tr. Charles Stewart, *Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli (Delhi 1972)*, p. 43.

ⁱⁱⁱ John Seyller, "A Dated Hamzanama Illustration", *Artibus Asiae* 53:3/4 (1993), pp. 503-05.

^{iv} See Stephen Markel, "Fit for an Emperor: Inscribed Works of Decorative Art Acquired by the Great Mughals", *Orientalia* 21:8 (1990), pp. 22-36.

^v Robert Skelton, *The Shahjahan Cup*, Victoria and Albert Museum (London 1969); Markel, *op. cit.*, p. 28, fig. 11.

^{vi} <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/west-and-central-asia>

^{vii} https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/safa_3/hd_safa_3.htm

^{viii} R Nath, *History of Mughal Architecture (henceforth HMA), Vol. I (New Delhi 1982)*, pp. 90-94, 109-19.

^{ix} *HMA, Vol. II (New Delhi 1985)*, pl. CXI

^x *Ibid.*, pl. CXLVII

^{xi} *For details, see HMA, Vol. III, pp. 122-24*

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 123

^{xiii} *For full details, see ibid, pp. 414-18 and pls.*

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, pl. CCXXXVIII

^{xv} *See Badri Atabai, Fehrist-i Muraqqat-i Kitab Khana-i Saltanati (feheran, s. 1353), p. 355, pl. on p. 354.*