

# Inter-pictorial Religious Discourse in Mughal Paintings: Translations and Interpretations of Marian Images\*

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The great interest that the Mughal emperors Akbar (r. 1556–1605) and Jahangir (r. 1605–1627) showed in European art, especially the Christian images brought to their court by Jesuit missionaries, has already garnered extensive scholarly deliberations.<sup>1</sup> However, as far as the adaptations and interpretations of such Christian images by Mughal court painters are concerned, insufficient attention has been paid to the religious meaning of these images. The popularity of Christian depictions at court, those of Mary and Jesus in particular, has been interpreted as part of a program of visual propaganda geared toward sacralizing the ruler's genealogy.<sup>2</sup> Other scholars have even argued that Mughal patrons and artists were either uninterested in or ignorant of the religious content of their European Christian models.<sup>3</sup> Only

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1 To give even a remotely complete list of important contributions in this field of research is beyond the scope of this essay. In addition to the specific works cited below, significant contributions concerning the adaptation of European art by the artists of the Mughal court have been made by Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Milo Cleveland Beach, Valerie Gonzalez, Monica Juneja, Ebba Koch, Mika Natif, Gregory Minissale, Amina Okada, Kavita Singh, Robert Skelton, and Som Prakash Verma, as well as Wheeler M. Thackston through his translations.

2 See Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *The Jesuits and the Grand Mogul: Renaissance Art at the Imperial Court of India, 1580–1630* (Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1998), 35–40. This explanatory approach has been taken up by numerous researchers, most recently by Mika Natif, *Mughal Occidentalism: Artistic Encounters between Europe and Asia at the Courts of India, 1580–1630* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 62–67. Other scholars have criticized this interpretation as insufficient or inaccurate. See Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “A Roomful of Mirrors: The Artful Embrace of Mughals and Franks, 1550–1700,” *Ars Orientalis* 39 (2010): 39–83; 79n24; Valerie Gonzalez, *Aesthetic Hybridity in Mughal Painting, 1526–1658* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 272.

3 Amina Okada states that the religious content of the European images held no meaning to the Mughal artists; Okada, *Indian Miniatures of the Mughal Court* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1992), 24. Som Prakash Verma declares that the court painting under Akbar was “freed from religious association;” Verma, *Biblical Themes in Mughal Painting* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2011), 4. Punam Madhok characterizes the Mughal interest in religious images mainly as serving the glorification of the emperors; Madhok, “Christian—Islamic Relations in the Court Art of Mughal India,” *The International Journal of the Arts in Society Annual Review* 4, no.

recently have scholars begun to attend to the layers of religious meaning involved in these confrontations with Christian pictorial models. Thus, in her analysis of the visual economy of Mughal paintings, Monica Juneja points to the *longue durée* and affective power of the motif of breast-feeding mothers, which is shared among artistic traditions of different religions.<sup>4</sup> Such visual *Pathosformeln*, she argues, formed the basis for the artistic treatment of religious motifs at the multicultural and multireligious court of the Mughals. In the works of the court painters that engage with images from various religious traditions, Mika Natif sees an expression of the Mughal emperors' policy of religious tolerance (*ṣulḥ-i kull*).<sup>5</sup> Soujit Das and Ila Gupta note the importance of the religious discussions at the Mughal court to the works of the painters.<sup>6</sup> Friederike Weis examines the Mughal adaptation of Christian paintings and themes with regard to the negotiations between the two pictorial traditions, on the one hand, and the similarities and differences between Christian and Muslim beliefs, on the other.<sup>7</sup> Valerie Gonzales emphasizes the tolerant, humanistic approach to religious difference at the court of the Mughal emperors and the multicultural complexity of the court culture.<sup>8</sup> She draws attention to the “double Christian–Muslim ipseity” of the work, that is, the ostensibly double religious identity of the paintings in the courtly context.<sup>9</sup>

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6 (2010): 67–78. Sanjay Subrahmanyam argues that the Mughal observers and court painters were less interested in the Christian narrative behind the scenes than in the “innovative visual language;” Subrahmanyam, “A Roomful of Mirrors,” 50.

4 Monica Juneja, “The Breast-feeding Mother as Icon and Source of Affect in Visual Practice: A Transcultural Journey,” in *Emotions in Rituals and Performances: South Asian and European Perspectives on Rituals and Performativity*, ed. Axel Michaels and Christoph Wulf (London: Routledge, 2012), 407–443; Monica Juneja, “Die Madonna des indischen Hofkünstlers Basawan – Eine transkulturelle Bilderreise,” in *Kanon Kunstgeschichte 2. Einführung in Werke, Methoden und Epochen. Neuzeit*, ed. Kristin Marek and Martin Schulz (Paderborn: Fink, 2015), 239–259.

5 Natif, *Mughal Occidentalism*, 67.

6 Soujit Das and Ila Gupta, “Images of Madonna in Imperial Mughal Paintings: Occidental Orientations,” *Journal of East-West Thought* 10 (December 2020): 81–97.

7 Friederike Weis, “Christian Iconography Disguised: Images of Childbirth and Motherhood in *Mer'āt al-Qods* and *Akbarnāme* Manuscripts, 1595–1605,” *South Asian Studies* 24, no. 1 (2008): 109–118; Friederike Weis, “Maryam – Maria: Bilder aus dem Marienleben aus einer *Mer'āt al-Qods*-Handschrift des Moghulhofes,” in *Image Match: Visueller Transfer, 'Imagescapes' und Intervisualität in globalen Bildkulturen*, ed. Martina Baleva, Ingeborg Reichle, and Oliver Lerone-Schultz (Munich: Fink, 2012), 63–85.

8 See Gonzalez, *Aesthetic Hybridity*, 272–276.

9 According to Gonzalez, this form of tolerance of ambiguity was ultimately based on the emperors' self-image as the highest religious authority and the representative of an “incorruptible and uncorrupted Islamic faith.” See Gonzalez, *Aesthetic Hybridity*, 276.

Building upon these recent approaches and findings, this essay examines how the Mughal court painters, following the political and ideological guidelines of imperial policy, actively adopted and translated Christian iconographic models in their own works. The essay undertakes an in-depth analysis of a few such works, arguing that they reveal a sophisticated artistic approach that was predicated upon meticulous intellectual understanding and interpretation of Christian religious iconography. Consequently, the article submits that the works of the Mughal court painters that adapted Christian motifs were neither passive copies nor mere exotic objects in the representational apparatus of the emperors. On the contrary, the aesthetic design and facture of the paintings suggest an inter-pictorial religious dialogue. Such a dialogue took place not only in the domain of art but also, and probably on a more primary level, in debates among scholars of different religions, held at the request of Emperor Akbar in the “House of Faith” (*Ibādat Khāna*) in the palace city of Fatehpur Sikri and, between 1608 and 1611, at the court of Jahangir in Lahore.<sup>10</sup> The latter debates in the presence of the emperor are recorded in the letters of the Jesuit priest Jerome Xavier as well as in ‘Abd al-Sattar’s *Majālis-i Jahāngīrī* (Assemblies of Jahangir).<sup>11</sup> The pictorial discourse, however, followed its

10 A well-known representation of such a debate, depicting two Jesuit Padres, was probably painted by Narsingh. See Narsingh (attr.), *Akbar Presiding over the Religious Discussions in the Ibadat Khana*, ca. 1604, Dublin, Chester Beatty Library, Inv. 03.263. On the interreligious discussions initiated by Akbar in Fatehpur Sikri, see Syed Ali Nadeem Rezavi, “Religious Disputations and Imperial Ideology: The Purpose and Location of Akbar’s Ibadatkhana,” *Studies in History* 24, no. 2 (2008): 195–209. On Jahangir’s liberal religious policy, see Sajida S. Alvi, “Religion and State during the Reign of Mughal Emperor Jahāngīr (1605–27): Nonjuristical Perspectives,” *Studia Islamica* 69 (1989): 95–119. Gregory Minissale saw a connection between Akbar’s religious policies and the work of the court’s painting workshop. See Minissale, *Images of Thought: Visuality in Islamic India 1550–1750*, 2nd ed. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), xx.

11 The participants of the different parties, however, evaluate the outcome of the disputes very differently. While the Jesuit reports claim a rhetorical superiority of their own side, in the detailed accounts of ‘Abd al-Sattar the Christian missionaries appear as the weaker party. See, for example, the letter of Xavier from September 24, 1608, in *Documentação Ultramarina Portuguesa*, vol. 3, ed. António da Silva Rego (Lisbon: Centro de Estudos Historicós Ultramarinos, 1963), 116–117; and ‘Abd al-Sattar, *Majālis-i Jahāngīrī: majlis ‘hā-yi shabānah-i darbār-i Nūr al-Dīn Jahāngīr: az 24 Rajab 1017 tā 19 Ramaẓān 1020 h. q.* ( Report of Night Assemblies at the Court of Nūr al-Dīn Jahāngīr from 24 Rajab 1017 to 19 Ramaẓān 1020 AH/October 24, 1608 to November 15, 1611 AD), ed. Ārif Nawshāhī and Mu‘īn Nizāmī (Tehran: Mīrāth-i Maktūb, 2006). An analysis of the narrative structures of the *Majālis-i Jahāngīrī*, together with an annotated German translation of the text, has been presented by Anna Kollatz, *Inspiration and Tradition: Strategien zur Beherrschung von Diversität am Mogulhof und ihre Darstellung in Maẓālis-i Ġahāngīrī (ca. 1608–11) von ‘Abd al-Sattār b. Qāsim Lāhōrī* (Berlin: EB Verlag, 2016). Kollatz shows that ‘Abd al-Sattar does not conceal his rejection of Christianity and that his presentation of the Jesuits, especially of Jerome Xavier, is strongly polemical, even taking on at times the features of a caricature. Kollatz, *Inspiration and Tradition*, 121–125. See also Muzzafar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Frank Disputations: Catholics and Muslims in the Court of Jahangir (1608–11),” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 46, no. 4 (2009): 457–511; and Corinne Lefèvre, “The *Majālis-i Jahāngīrī* (1608–11): Dialogue and Asiatic Otherness at the Mughal Court,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 55, no. 2/3 (2012): 255–286.

own rules and offered artists possibilities in terms of visual argumentation that were quite distinct from those available to theologians in the context of written debate. Images of course function differently than texts and words, and the tendency of pictorial motifs to have open-ended meanings makes them less suitable to articulate clear-cut religious affiliations and positions.<sup>12</sup> In the context of pictorial dialogues between two artistic and religious traditions, even the slightest stylistic transformation and unobtrusive pictorial quotations can be of great significance, for such nuances may completely alter the meaning conveyed.<sup>13</sup>

The present essay contends that a close look at these nuances not only reveals astonishing craftsmanship but also foregrounds a high degree of intellectual reflection on the part of Mughal artists in their engagement with the pictorial tradition of Christian Europe. To this end, I discuss paintings modeled after two European representations of the Virgin and Child at the courts of the Mughal emperors Akbar and Jahangir. The European models comprise a famous Marian icon from the Borghese Chapel of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome and a copper engraving by Albrecht Dürer. The Mughal works, executed by unidentified court artists, consist of a miniature from a *Mir'āt al-quds* (Mirror of holiness) manuscript and a leaf from a seventeenth-century Mughal album now in Windsor.

### **The icon of Santa Maria Maggiore: Global networks, salvific evidence, and an interreligious discourse on images**

Among the Catholic images that were disseminated in the Jesuit mission, the Marian icon of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome occupies a central place (Fig. 1).<sup>14</sup> The image was considered to be an authentic rendering of Mary and the infant Jesus by the evangelist Luke himself, which gave it a great importance in the history of the Society of Jesus and its image policy.<sup>15</sup> The significance

12 On the ability of images to create spaces of reflection that deviate from written discourses, see Monica Juneja, “Translating the Body into Image: The Body Politic and Visual Practice at the Mughal Court during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *Paragana* 18, no. 1 (2009): 243–266.

13 In an exemplary analysis of an eighteenth-century work by Mir Kalan Khan, Kavita Singh has shown that the Mughal artists distinguished between various pictorial traditions and idioms known at the court. Having these at their disposal, they thoughtfully used them, sometimes side by side, to convey different meanings. See Kavita Singh, *Real Birds in Imagined Gardens: Mughal Painting between Persia and Europe* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, Getty Publications, 2017), 1–11.

14 This is true even for the current Pope Francis I, who regularly visits the icon before and after traveling. See Kirstin Noreen, “*Salus populi*: Icons and the Protection of the People,” *The Journal of Icon Studies* 3 (2020), accessed November 10, 2021, <https://www.museumofrussianicons.org/salus-populi/>.

15 The dissemination and propagation of the icon served to create a “collective mental image,” which, according to Jens Baumgarten, constitutes one of the central points of post-Tridentine image

of the image within the Society also stems from the fact that the founder of the Society, Ignatius of Loyola, held it in high regard.<sup>16</sup> On Christmas night of 1538, Ignatius celebrated his first Mass as an ordained priest in the presence of this Lucan painting and a relic of Christ's cradle that was also kept in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome.<sup>17</sup> The actual icon was never in the custody of the Jesuits, but in 1569 the third general of the Society, Francesco Borgia, was able to obtain papal permission to have it copied. This led to a global distribution of the image in the form of oil paintings and prints. The first copy was placed in the Roman Jesuit church of Sant' Andrea al Quirinale for the novices to practice daily prayer in front of it.<sup>18</sup> In the following years, numerous other Jesuit houses in Europe also came to be furnished with this image of Mary. As an object of novitiate devotional practice, the Madonna of Santa Maria Maggiore became a central figure in the Jesuit imagination, offering members of the Society a moral, theological, and geographical point of reference. The copies of the Roman icon installed in Jesuit households and carried in processions in various parts of the world formed a global network that oriented the Jesuit missionaries, even those who were far from Europe.<sup>19</sup>

However, this representation of the Virgin and Child did more than simply offer a touchstone to members of the Society; the Jesuits also employed it to incorporate the most important Catholic ruling houses into a kind of image network, the participating houses being bound together by their possession and veneration of this Lucan icon. Oil painting copies were sent to Philip II and Mary of Spain, to the royal family of Portugal, to Ferdinand I and Elizabeth of Austria, to the queen of France Catherine de' Medici, and to several northern

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politics. See Baumgarten, *Konfession, Bild und Macht: Visualisierung als katholisches Herrschafts- und Disziplinierungskonzept in Rom und im habsburgischen Schlesien (1560–1740)* (Hamburg: Bölling und Galitz, 2004), 204.

16 A fundamental source on the Marian icon is Gerhard Wolf, *Salus populi Romani: Die Geschichte römischer Kultbilder im Mittelalter* (Weinheim: Acta humaniora, 1990).

17 See Pasquale D'Elia, "La prima diffusione nel mondo dell'immagine di Maria 'Salus Populi Romani'," *Fede e Arte* 2 (1954): 301–311.

18 D'Elia, "La prima diffusione," 302. The importance of the image for the Jesuit novitiate is also emphasized by Kirstin Noreen, "The Icon of Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome: An Image and Its Afterlife," *Renaissance Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 660–672; 666.

19 In their correspondence with religious superiors, the Jesuit missionaries sometimes even expressed their desire to receive a copy of the Roman icon for their private devotion. This was also the case with Anthony Porcari and Francesco Pasio in India. See Josef Wicki SJ, ed., *Documenta Indica*, 18 vols. (Rome: Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu, 1948–1988), here vol. 12 (1972), 498; vol. 11 (1970), 372. On the importance of this icon for the Christian mission in India, see Alberto Saviello, "Kultbilder als Agenten: Der Einsatz römischer Kultbilder in der jesuitischen Indienmission der Frühen Neuzeit," in *Bildagenten: Historische und zeitgenössische Bildpraxen in globalen Kulturen*, ed. Christiane Kruse and Birgit Mersmann (Paderborn: Fink, 2021), 108–117.

European ruling houses.<sup>20</sup> With the intention of drawing Emperor Akbar into the network of rulers that were loyal to the Pope, the first Jesuit legation brought two copies of the icon to the court in Fatehpur Sikri: one that had been painted in Rome by an unnamed artist, and another painted by Brother Manuel Godinho in Goa.<sup>21</sup> The Roman copy was presented to Akbar as a gift, while Godinho's painting remained in the possession of the Jesuits.<sup>22</sup>



**Fig. 1.** Icon of the Virgin Mary with the Infant Christ (“Salus Populi Romani”), paint on cedar wood, probably late antique with overpainting of thirteenth century, Borghese Chapel, Santa Maria Maggiore, Rome.

20 On the dissemination of the Roman icon in American and other Asian territories and the associated consequences of the technical reproduction and medialization of sacred images, see Mia M. Mochizuki, “Sacred Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction: The *Salus Populi Romani* Madonna in the World,” *Kyoto Studies in Art History* 1 (2016): 129–144, <https://doi.org/10.14989/229454>. For Japan, see Yoshie Kojima, “Reproduction of the Image of Madonna *Salus Populi Romani* in Japan,” in *Between East and West: Reproductions in Art. Proceedings of the 2013 CIHA Colloquium in Naruto, Japan, 15th–18th January 2013*, ed. Shigetoshi Osano (Cracow: IRSA, 2014), 373–387.

21 Because in Portuguese sources the icon is sometimes referred to as Madonna “del Pópulo,” Edward Maclagan and subsequently other researchers mistook it for a copy of the icon preserved in the Roman Augustinian church of Santa Maria del Popolo. See Maclagan, *The Jesuits and the Great Mogul* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1932), 228; Gauvin Alexander Bailey, *Art on the Jesuit Missions in Asia and Latin America, 1542–1773* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 126; Verma, *Biblical Themes*, 30; Madhok, “Christian–Islamic Relations,” 76; Das and Gupta, “Images of Madonna,” 83; Subrahmanyam, “A Roomful of Mirrors,” 50. However, the Jesuits used the designation “Madonna del Pópulo” for the icon of Mary from Santa Maria Maggiore. The icon of Santa Maria del Popolo itself played no role in the missionary efforts of the order. See D’Elia, “La prima diffusione,” 304. Another example is found in the Jesuit reports from Mexico. See Félix Zubillaga SJ, ed., *Monumenta Mexicana*, vol. 2 (Rome: Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu, 1959), 779.

22 See Wicki, *Documenta Indica*, vol. 12, 40.

The missionaries were firmly committed to propagating their image of Mary not only across Europe but also in India. From 1578 onwards, the image can be traced through Goa, Cochin, and Baçaim (Vasai-Virar), where the Jesuits presented it to large audiences.<sup>23</sup> Following Roman custom, the Jesuits displayed the icon during the procession for the Feast of the Assumption of Mary on August 15 in Goa, and on Christmas 1602 it was showcased with candles and a double curtain at the high altar of the Jesuit church in Agra, attracting over 10,000 visitors.<sup>24</sup> Such events left a discernible impression on the Mughal court and its art. In 1590, when no Christian missionary was present at the court in Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar himself oversaw the ceremonial presentation of the Roman image for the Feast of the Assumption of Mary.<sup>25</sup> A miniature in a copy of a *Mir'āt al-quds* in Lahore, unfortunately very poorly preserved, records a similar feast, with Christian clerics unveiling the icon of the Madonna behind an altar (Fig. 2). Edward Maclagan has suggested that this image depicts the icon's ceremonial presentation to Akbar.<sup>26</sup>



**Fig. 2.** *School of Manohar*; Presentation of the Roman Icon from Santa Maria Maggiore, before 1602, opaque watercolor; ink and gold on paper, folio 21.5 x 12 cm, Lahore Museum, Lahore, M-645/MSS-16.

23 Wicki, *Documenta Indica*, vol. 12, 461; vol. 15 (1981), 547.

24 Wicki, *Documenta Indica*, vol. 11, 660. On the Roman procession, see Wolf, *Salus populi romani*, 37–59. On the 1602 presentation in Agra, see Fernão Guerreiro SJ, *Relação anual das coisas que fizeram os Padres da Companhia de Jesus nas suas Missões do Japão, China, Cataio, Tidore, Ternate, Ambóino, Malaca, Pegu, Bengala, Bisnagá, Maduré costa da Pescaria, Manar, Ceilão, Travancor, Malabar, Sodomala, Goa, Salcete, Lahor, Diu, Etiopia a alta ou Preste João, Monomotapa, Angola, Guiné, Serra Leoa, cabo Verde e Brasil: Nos anos de 1600 a 1609, e do processo da conversão e cristandade daquelas partes*, ed. Artur Viegas, 3 vols. (Coimbra: Imprensa de Universidade, 1930–1942), vol. 1 (1930), 299–303. For an analysis of this presentation as described in detail in the source, see Alberto Saviello, “Begnadete Kunst: Das Marienbild von Santa Maria Maggiore in Indien,” *kritische berichte. Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften* 45, no. 3 (2017): 55–66; 61–62.

25 Maclagan, *The Jesuits*, 228.

26 Maclagan cites a Persian inscription at the foot of the painting that states “after citing a blessing on it the chief Padre gave it into his hands.” Maclagan, *The Jesuits*, 227.

According to the report of Rudolfo Acquaviva, the leader of the first Jesuit mission at Akbar's court, the two copies of the Roman icon were met with enthusiasm by the Mughal courtiers.<sup>27</sup> The emperor himself supposedly visited the friars' lodging several times and prayed before the images. He then showed the icon to his confidants and court artists. The Mughal audience was not only enamored by the artistry of the European painters but also commented on the religious significance of the Marian image in an unexpected way. An esteemed dignitary of the court was "amazed" (*pasmado*) by the painting and called Mary the "true queen of heaven on her throne."<sup>28</sup> This is an astonishing statement, as it does not conform to the tenets of the Islamic faith in which the Virgin, even though venerated, is not ascribed the rank of the "Queen of Heaven."<sup>29</sup> Rather, this is a traditional Christian designation (*Regina coeli*), one that is in fact also used in the oldest written reference to the Roman icon.<sup>30</sup> Since there is no mention of the Mughal courtier's prior knowledge of this designation, the Jesuit report implies that the deeper theological meaning of the image was revealed, almost miraculously, to the Indian viewer through contemplation alone. Subsequent reports highlight the strong emotional response that the Lucan image elicited from Indian viewers on various occasions.<sup>31</sup>

In evaluating the merit of these claims, it is important to bear in mind that the letters by the Jesuit missionaries were primarily addressed to their superiors and, more broadly speaking, to Christian readers in Europe, with a clear intention to emphasize the religious significance and efficacy of the venerated image in the mission. Sanjay Subrahmanyam considers the missionaries' claims about the enthusiastic reception of the painting to be dubious, given that the Mughal elite continued to express negative opinions about Christianity even after encountering the icon. In his analysis, the painting did not convince the Indian viewers of Christian doctrine as such, as Acquaviva suggests in his

27 On the reactions in Fatehpur Sikri, see Wicki, *Documenta Indica*, vol. 12, 12, 16, 40.

28 Wicki, *Documenta Indica*, vol. 12, 40: "[D]isse que aquella N. Senhora era a verdadeira rainha dos ceos, que estava asentada no seu throno."

29 In Christianity and Islam, Mary/Maryam is revered as the virgin mother of Jesus/Isā. She is the only woman whose name is mentioned in the Quran, and she is considered a role model of the virtuous Muslim woman. In Islam, however, she is not the mother of God, so she is not accorded a rank next to God as "Queen of Heaven." On the veneration of Maryam in Islam, see Zeki Saritoprak, "Mary in Islam," *Oxford Bibliographies* (2015), accessed August 11, 2022, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780195390155/obo-9780195390155-0143.xml>. See also John Kaltner, "The Muslim Mary," in *New Perspectives on the Nativity*, ed. Jeremy Corley (London: T&T Clark International, 2009), 165–179.

30 The title "Regina coeli" is said to go back to a miracle from the time of Pope Gregory the Great, which is mentioned in a thirteenth-century text. See Wolf, *Salus populi Romani*, 94.

31 See Saviello, "Begnadete Kunst," 61.



accounts, but prompted a purely aesthetic fascination by virtue of its peculiar visual language.<sup>32</sup> Subrahmanyam is certainly justified in raising these doubts, and the aesthetic effect of the icon—with its relatively naturalistic and plastic rendering of what is depicted, which in terms of artistic approach must have seemed unusual to the members of the Mughal court—should not be underestimated. However, the adaptations and translations of the motif of the Roman icon by Mughal court painters demonstrate a discernible element of reflection on the religious meaning of the Christian model. Numerous examples in which Indian painters incorporated the figures of mother and child from the Roman icon into their own works speak to the positive reception with which the Christian model was met.<sup>33</sup>

Another miniature from the aforementioned *Mir'āt al-quds* manuscript may be illustrative here. This text, which narrates the life of Christ according to the New Testament and apocrypha, was commissioned by Akbar around 1600 and written by Father Jerome Xavier, the head of the third Jesuit mission at the Mughal court.<sup>34</sup> The treatise is particularly interesting for our purposes because it foregrounds the importance and power of Christian images. It begins by recounting the apocryphal story of King Abgar of Edessa, who is said to have been cured of leprosy by the sight of a miraculous image of Christ, the *Mandylion*, and this ostensibly led to his success in all subsequent military campaigns. In addition to the emphasis the story places on the power of religious images, the homophony between the names of the Christianized king of Edessa (Abgar) and the Mughal emperor (Akbar) was probably another reason why Xavier opened his text with this extra-biblical story.<sup>35</sup>

The Madonna and Child pair from the Roman icon appears twice in the *Mir'āt al-quds* manuscripts: once in the aforementioned depiction of the ceremonial presentation of the icon at the altar and a second time in another copy of the manuscript made around 1602. This latter copy was made for Prince Selim, the future Emperor Jahangir, during a period in which he had rebelled against his father and established his own painting workshop at his court in Allahabad (Fig. 3). In Selim's manuscript, the Virgin from the icon appears as a full-length figure within a narrative scene and can be recognized by her gesture and the

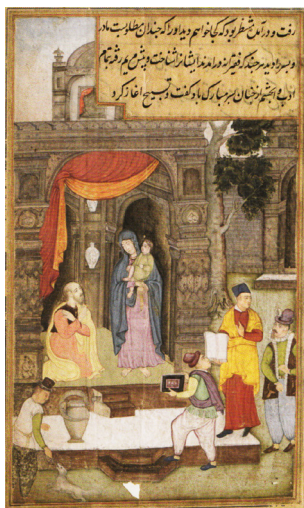
32 Subrahmanyam, "A Roomful of Mirrors," 50.

33 Friederike Weis, "Die *Salus Populi Romani* in Miniaturen der Moghulzeit," in *Vanamālā: Festschrift für Adalbert J. Gail*, ed. Klaus Bruhn and Gerd J. R. Mevissen (Berlin: Weidler, 2006), 235–242.

34 For a comprehensive analysis and translation of this text, see *Mir'āt al-quds (Mirror of Holiness): A Life of Christ for Emperor Akbar. A Commentary on Father Jerome Xavier's Text and the Miniatures of Cleveland Museum of Art, Acc. No. 2005. 145*, ed. Pedro Moura Carvalho, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

35 Carvalho, *Mir'āt al-quds*, 33.

cloth (*mappula*) she holds.<sup>36</sup> The image shows the story of the prophet Simeon, who doubted the stories about the virgin birth in the sacred scriptures. An angel announced to Simeon that he would “see the Virgin and Christ with his own eyes” (*khahi did cheshm khod dushizeh va mesih ra*) and overcome his skepticism.<sup>37</sup> The miniature captures the moment in which the prophet sees the mother and child in front of the Temple, recognizes them as the Virgin and Messiah, and kneels in veneration. The figure in which Simeon recognizes the Virgin, thereby overcoming his doubts, is the very same figure of Mary that viewers would have known from the familiar Roman icon. The episode from the Gospel of Luke is thus linked to a pictorial quotation of the Roman icon, itself traditionally attributed to Luke, such that the Gospel and the painting seem to authenticate each other. Indeed, the Mughal painter treats the icon of Santa Maria Maggiore as a visual archetype that mediates in dispelling doubts concerning the mystery of the virgin birth. Further underscoring the salvific effect of the encounter with the archetypal Virgin and Child from the Roman icon, the painter renders Simeon in the image of one of the lepers healed by Jesus, as depicted in the Spanish Jesuit Jerome Nadal’s *Jesus Cures Ten Lepers*.<sup>38</sup>



**Fig. 3.** Simeon Kneels in Front of Mary and Jesus after Recognizing Them, 1602–1604, opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper, 21.4 x 12.6 cm (image), from a *Mir'āt al-quds* of Father Jerome Xavier made for Prince Selim, Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund 2005.145.40.a.

36 To my knowledge, the citation of the Madonna and Child from the Roman icon was first identified by Friederike Weis, “Christian Iconography Disguised,” 112.

37 Simeon’s doubts about the virgin birth are given much space in the Persian text. In addition, the passage from the Gospel of Luke is slightly changed, since the Persian version says that Simeon will see the Virgin and Christ with his own eyes, while in the Bible only Christ is mentioned. See Luke 2:26; Carvalho, *Mir'āt al-quds*, 157, 264.

38 Carvalho, *Mir'āt al-quds*, 50.

In his study of the extant *Mir'āt al-quds* manuscripts, Pedro Moura Carvalho has convincingly argued that the miniatures were not created under the guidance of the Christian missionaries but more likely resulted from the court and the court workshop's extensive engagement with the text of the *Mir'āt al-quds* itself.<sup>39</sup> Friederike Weis has shown that many of the illustrations in the *Mir'āt al-quds* manuscripts were inspired by the Persian pictorial tradition and conformed to the taste of the Mughal court.<sup>40</sup> Taking these factors into account, it is all the more astonishing how closely the painting, with its pictorial allusion to the Roman icon, corresponds to Christian interpretations of the encounter between the Virgin and the prophet Simeon. Simeon's enlightenment through the encounter with Mary and the Christ Child in front of the Temple, commemorated in the church year with the feast of "Mary's Candlemas" (*Purificatio Mariae*), took place during Mary's visit to offer the purification sacrifice, forty days after the birth of Jesus. The icon of Santa Maria Maggiore took center stage in the traditional Roman procession for the *Purificatio*.<sup>41</sup> It is also worthwhile to recall that the example of Simeon cements the connection between the sense of sight and religious experience. This is emphasized not only in the revelation granted to the prophet, that is the sight of the Virgin through corporeal eyes, but also in the hymn of praise he sings after this encounter, which characterizes optical perception as a means of attaining theological insight, and sight as a source of enlightenment for the Gentiles: "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel" (Luke 2:30–32). The responsory *Videte miraculum!* (Behold the miracle!), which was traditionally sung in the Roman liturgy on Mary's Candlemas, points in the same direction, as the chant's deictic statement could be connected with the ritual unveiling of an image of Mary and Christ.<sup>42</sup> Through his selection of models, including

39 The choice of scenes, which from a Christian point of view omits central events such as the baptism of Christ and the Crucifixion, as well as the use of various iconographic details that clearly deviate from traditional Christian depictions, speak in favor of this. For example, Mary rides a camel on the flight to Egypt. See Carvalho, *Mir'āt al-quds*, 56.

40 Weis, "Maryam – Maria." On the other hand, Gauvin Alexander Bailey rightly emphasizes that the miniatures have a theatrical quality, for instance in the use of drawn curtains, which probably derives from theatrical and other forms of presentation used by Jesuit missionaries. Bailey, "The Lahore *Mirat Al-Quds* and the Impact of Jesuit Theatre on Mughal Painting," *South Asian Studies* 13, no. 1 (1997): 31–44. The various sources of inspiration are not mutually exclusive and attest to the multifaceted nature of Mughal court art.

41 On this day, the eighteen main Marian images from the deaconries of Rome were brought to the Marian icon of Santa Maria Maggiore to celebrate Mass before the icon. See Wolf, *Salus populi Romani*, 49, 327.

42 See Cornelius Schulting SJ, *Bibliothecae ecclesiasticae seu Commentariorum sacrorum de expositione et illustratione Missalis et Breuiarii: tomus primus in duas partes diuiditur [-quartus]*

the Roman icon attributed to the evangelist Luke, the unknown Mughal painter composed an image that conforms to Christian doctrine and at the same time, highlights the power and importance of religious images. The importance of such images is also highlighted through the visual comparison that the painter stages between the Virgin and Child and the open, blank book presented by a figure with an ecclesiastical headdress in the right foreground (Fig. 3). Through the argumentative gesture of the raised index finger and the ostentatious open book, the man, characterized by his clothing as a Christian scholar, underlines his claim to contribute essential information to the events depicted. His ambition, however, is contradicted by the empty pages of the book, which obviously contain no information. The addition of this figure once again underscores the centrality of visual evidence to the Simeon story: recognition is achieved through bodily eyes, as opposed to the written word of religious truth.

The artist at Selim's court was not content to simply elucidate the relevance and power of religious images, however, a theme that already features in the text of the manuscript. Rather, it seems as though they sought to critically distance their painting from the Christian tradition by introducing another figure, namely that of a man feeding grapes to a dog, which appears in the left foreground of the painting and is not mentioned in the text. This motif combines the classical Christian symbol of the grapevine<sup>43</sup> with an animal traditionally considered to be unclean in Islam.<sup>44</sup> While not interfering with the general message surrounding the visual recognition of the virgin birth of Jesus—which is consistent with Islamic tradition—this feature seems anomalous and inappropriate alongside a sacred subject. Although Jahangir

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(Cologne: typis Stephani Hemmerden, 1599), 81–82. Until the post-Tridentine period, the chant was also part of the Roman breviary. See Jürgen Bärsch, “Kunstwerke im Dienste der Liturgie: Gebrauch und Funktion liturgischer Sachkultur im mittelalterlichen Gottesdienst des Frauenstifts Essen nach dem Zeugnis des *Liber ordinarius*,” in *...wie das Gold den Augen leuchtet; Schätze aus dem Essener Frauenstift*, ed. Birgitta Falk, Thomas Schilp, and Michael Schlagheck (Essen: Klartext, 2007), 13–38; 35n96. On the use and unveiling of Marian images at Purification processions, see Bärsch, “Kunstwerke im Dienste der Liturgie,” 33–37.

43 Carvalho mentions the noteworthiness of this scene, with the grape being understood as a symbol for Christianity at the Mughal court. Carvalho, *Mir'at al-quds*, 93, 132n80. He gives no explanation for this but refers to a drawing by Manohar, which shows a dog at the feet of a Jesuit. The dog can be seen staring at a bunch of grapes. Manohar, *The Jesuit Missionary*, ca. 1590–1600, Musée Guimet, inv. no. 3619Gc. See Okada, *Indian Miniatures*, 144, fig. 165.

44 The mouth and saliva are considered particularly unclean, contact with them requiring ritual purification. The mere presence of a dog can profane a mosque or invalidate a prayer. In the Quran, the dog is used as a simile for the unbelievers (7:176). In Sufism, the dog may embody the lower instincts. See Richard C. Foltz, *Animals in Islamic Tradition and Muslim Cultures* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006), 129–130. See also François Viré, “Kalb,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, ed. Peri Bearman, Thierry Bianquis, Clifford Edmund Bosworth, Emeri Johannes van Donzel, and Wolfhart Peter Heinrichs, accessed January 15, 2023, [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912\\_islam\\_COM\\_0425](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_COM_0425).

and Akbar appreciated dogs, with Akbar even keeping dogs as pets,<sup>45</sup> dogs were considered impure (*najis*) in terms of religious practice. While the figure of the dog can carry a range of meanings, in this context it can be understood as a (visual) marker of differences in religious views and, more specifically, of deviation from a strictly orthodox Islam. A telling example of the significance of dogs in religious debate comes from the first Indian Grand Mufti ‘Abd al Qadir Badauni. Badauni was a chronicler at Akbar’s court who criticized the emperor for his departure from Islam. He not only frequently used the term “dog” to insult so-called infidels and blasphemers but also condemned the appreciation of these animals and their favorable treatment at Akbar’s court.<sup>46</sup> Through the insertion of the symbolically charged figure of the grape-eating dog, the painter thus creates a counterpoint to the core message of the picture and thereby offers the viewer an alternative view on the Christian tradition propagated in the text.

The figures added by the painter and not mentioned in the text of the *Mir’āt al-quds* are usually foregrounded within the picture and comment on the central scene via their gestures and gazes. The paintings stage a self-reflexive moment with these internal onlookers, so that our encounter with these images appears as a second-order experience, a stratagem that opens up a meta-level of reflection.<sup>47</sup> In another painting that depicts the *Annunciation* (Fig. 4), two gesticulating women are foregrounded alongside a dog. The animal sits immediately beneath the archangel and looks up at him with interest.<sup>48</sup> Similar to the previous example, the image playfully juxtaposes the ritually unclean animal with a heavenly being. Here, the artist seems to allude to a well-known statement (*hadīth*) by the Prophet Muhammad, according to which an angel would not enter a house that had either a dog or a picture inside.<sup>49</sup> For the

45 Abu-’l-Faḍl Ibn-Mubārak, *The Ā’in-i Akbari*, trans. Henry Blochmann, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1927), 203.

46 See ‘Abdu-’l-Qādir Ibn-i-Mulūk Shāh (known as al-Badauni), *Muntakhab-ut-Tawārīkh*, vol. 2, trans. William Henry Lowe (Calcutta: The Baptist Mission Press, 1884), 314.

47 The use of such viewer figures seems to derive from the Persian tradition where they likewise enrich the representation with a level of self-reflection. See Alberto Saviello, “See and Be Amazed! Spectator Figures in Persian Manuscript Painting,” in *The Public in the Picture: Involving the Beholder in Antique, Islamic, Byzantine and Western Medieval, and Renaissance Art*, ed. Beate Fricke and Urte Krass (Zürich: diaphanes, 2015), 231–248.

48 In a detailed discussion of the picture, Friederike Weis points out various elements of the Christian–European as well as the Islamic–Persian pictorial traditions. Friederike Weis, “Maryam – Maria,” 73–79. An adaptation of the figure of Mary to Indian visual culture can also be found in the physiognomy and black hair of the figure. In the latter detail, the painting clearly deviates from the text, which states, “Her hair was of golden colour.” Carvalho, *Mir’āt al-quds*, 145, 248.

49 “Narrated Abu Talha: I heard Allah’s Messenger (ﷺ) saying, ‘Angels (of Mercy) do not enter a house wherein there is a dog or a picture of a living creature (a human being or an animal).’” Muḥammad

theologically informed Mughal viewer, the visual alignment of the dog with an angel entering a domestic space may thus have raised the question not only of the status of the animal but also of the legitimacy and function of pictorial representations of religious content, the latter being a central theme of the *Mir'āt al-quds*.



**Fig. 4.** The Annunciation, opaque watercolor and gold on paper; 1608–1604, folio: 26.2 x 15.4 cm, from a *Mir'āt al-quds* of Father Jerome Xavier made for Prince Selim, Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund 2005.145.15.a.

ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* 3225, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan from the Center for Muslim–Jewish Engagement (USC–MSA), accessed August 18, 2022, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/59>.

We know from the Mughal courtier ‘Abd al-Sattar, who was involved in the creation of the *Mir’āt al-quds* and helped Xavier to produce an appropriate Persian translation, that the book played an important role in the nightly disputes at Jahangir’s court. ‘Abd al-Sattar himself used it to underscore his criticism of Christian teachings.<sup>50</sup> It can therefore be said that the paintings did not aim to be mere illustrations of Christian content, using as they did representational strategies to raise their own religious questions. In this sense, they anticipated the polemical threads of later religious discussions recorded by ‘Abd al-Sattar. However, the paintings do not go so far as to call into question the religious beliefs of the Mughal rulers—for, despite the reservations in Islamic tradition surrounding the status of the image, the emperors surely valued images as much as they valued dogs.

### **Albrecht Dürer’s *Madonna by the Tree*: Translating a religious image**

Another European Madonna and Child that found its way into Mughal art is Albrecht Dürer’s 1513 engraving *Madonna by the Tree* (Fig. 5).<sup>51</sup> This relatively small print, measuring 118 x 75 mm, did not attain the same level of recognition as the icon of Santa Maria Maggiore, yet at least two surviving works can be inter pictorially linked with it: an early seventeenth-century painting bound in an album (*muraqqa’*) that was assembled toward the end of the eighteenth century, now in Windsor Castle (Fig. 7), and a marginal illumination from an album composed for Emperor Jahangir, in the Berlin State Library (Fig. 6). In the album preserved at Windsor, the Virgin and Child inhabit an independent, framed miniature at the center of a page, while in Jahangir’s Album the pair is set against a vegetal pattern in gold paint covering the entire margin.

Dürer’s works seem to have enjoyed special esteem at the Mughal court. Anja Grebe has analyzed seven Mughal works that relate to those by Dürer.<sup>52</sup> The aforementioned page from Jahangir’s Album shows at least three, probably even four, motifs that were taken from various prints by Dürer or

50 Alam and Subrahmanyam, “Frank Disputations,” 505.

51 Rainer Schoch, Matthias Mende, and Anna Scherbaum, *Albrecht Dürer: Das druckgraphische Werk*, vol. 1: *Kupferstiche, Eisenradierungen und Kaltnadelblätter* (Munich: Prestel, 2001), 163–164.

52 Anja Grebe, “Albrecht Dürer in Asian Art: Paradigms of Cross-Cultural Reproduction and Transformation,” in *Between East and West: Reproductions in Art*, ed. Shigetoshi Osano (Cracow: IRSA, 2014), 389–402. Anand Amaladass and Gudrun Löwner suggest that the painting *Lady with a Child Worshipping the Sun* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which is attributed to Basawan, was also inspired by Dürer’s depiction of the Crucifixion. However, this can hardly be deduced from a direct comparison of the images. See Amaladass and Löwner, *Christian Themes in Indian Art: From the Mogul Times till Today* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2012), 85.

his European emulators. In addition to the Virgin and Child, the blessing Peter from *St. Peter and St. John Healing the Lame* and, in the lower margin, the figure of John the Evangelist from the *Crucifixion* are indisputable—both from the *Engraved Passion* series (ca. 1511–1513). Ernst Kühnel and Herrmann Götz, who were the first to draw attention to this page, also suggested that the figure of the man with the hourglass and book approaching the Virgin from the left was an adaptation of the African sage from the *Adoration of the Magi*, from Dürer’s *Life of Mary* cycle (ca. 1501–1502).<sup>53</sup> It is telling that the source of such figures can be traced back almost exclusively to models by a single European artist. This is even more noteworthy with regard to an album that generally contains an eclectic mix of calligraphy, paintings, and some occasional examples of European prints. The composition of an album was strongly influenced by the aesthetic preferences of its patron,<sup>54</sup> and Emperor Jahangir is known to have placed great value on his connoisseurship.<sup>55</sup> As a “museum in a book”<sup>56</sup> or a “lieu de memoire,”<sup>57</sup> an album archived specimens of work by individual masters and gave these an exemplary character. Thus, despite their sometimes eclectic and experimental assemblages, the albums tended to reflect an established canon of masters, thereby gaining a normative, almost art-historical significance.<sup>58</sup> Since all of Dürer’s prints in question were marked with his monogram (“AD”), which functioned as a kind of trademark, one might presume that the reference to the European master was a deliberate choice on the part of the artist. In particular, the figure of St. John in the lower margin testifies to the fact that “AD” must have been known to the court painters as an outstanding European artistic personality. The same figure from Dürer’s *Crucifixion* also served as a model for a drawing by Abu’l

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53 See Ernst Kühnel and Hermann Götz, *Indian Book Painting: From Jahāngir’s Album in the State Library in Berlin* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1926), 46–47. The combination of the Virgin and Child pair with the approaching man also stages a kind of worship scenario. However, apart from the bent posture, the figure of the man hardly shows any other similarities with the one from Dürer’s engraving. See also Grebe, “Albrecht Dürer,” 397.

54 On the conception and tradition of Persian albums, which in turn became models for Ottoman and Mughal albums, see David J. Roxburgh, *Prefacing the Image: The Writing of Art History in Sixteenth-Century Iran* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).

55 Nūr al-Dīn Muḥammad Jahāngīr, *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*, trans. and ed. Wheeler M. Thackston (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 268.

56 Molly E. Aitken, “Parataxis and the Practice of Reuse, from Mughal Margins to Mīr Kalān Khān,” *Archives of Asian Art* 59 (2009): 81–103; 92.

57 Roxburgh, *Prefacing the Image*, 64.

58 Roxburgh, *Prefacing the Image*, 133–45. Ebba Koch describes the experimental, allusive, and playful character of the album’s assemblages as a “think tank for allegory.” See Koch, “The Mughal Emperor as Solomon, Majnun, and Orpheus or the Album as a Think Tank for Allegory,” *Muqarnas* 27 (2010): 277–311.



Hasan, who would later be praised by Jahangir as one of the greatest artists of his time.<sup>59</sup> Various authors have emphasized the emulative character of this drawing, which, according to the inscription, was created by Abu'l Hasan at the tender age of thirteen.<sup>60</sup> In this drawing, in a kind of intercultural *paragone*, the young Mughal painter places himself in direct competition with Dürer, who, like others among his European contemporaries, had prided himself on his precocious artistic talent.<sup>61</sup> Dürer's prints thus offered the court painters an opportunity both to engage with some remarkably evocative examples of European art and to compete with an esteemed master of a different artistic language and tradition.



**Fig. 5.** *Albrecht Dürer; Madonna by the Tree, 1513, engraving on paper, 11.6 x 7.5 cm, Windsor Castle, Royal Collection Trust, RCIN 800045.*

59 See *Saint John the Evangelist* after Dürer, by Abu'l Hasan, 1600–1601, probably Allahabad, Mughal India. Brush drawing with gouache on paper, 100 x 46 mm, Ashmolean Museum EA1978.2597. Jahāngīr, *The Jahāngīrnama*, 268.

60 Natif, *Mughal Occidentalism*, esp. 106: “By boasting about his youth and establishing a clear line of competition, Abu'l Hasan flaunted his talent with respect to the European Master.”

61 While Grebe suggests that Abu'l Hasan is referring to age indications like “AE[tatis]12” and “IHW.AE17,” which appear on copies of Dürer's works by Johann Wierix, Mika Natif argues that he is rather alluding to Dürer's self-portrait, which the Nurembergian artist claimed, via an inscription on the painting, to have created at the age of thirteen. See Grebe, “Albrecht Dürer,” 398; Natif, *Mughal Occidentalism*, 105–106. On Mughal artists' approaches to European prints, see also Yael Rice, “Lines of Perception: European Prints and the Mughal *kitābhāna*,” in *Prints in Translation, 1450–1750: Image, Materiality, Space*, ed. Suzanne Karr Schmidt and Edward H. Wouk (London: Routledge, 2017), 203–223.

**Fig. 6.** Illustrated Borders with Figural Motifs after Albrecht Dürer, *Jahangir's album*, folio 5r, 1608–1618, ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, approx. 40.0 x 26.2 cm, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung, *Libr. Pict. A117*, fol. 5r:



**Fig. 7.** The Madonna and Child, after Dürer, early seventeenth century, ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, folio 26 of a late eighteenth century Mughal album, 20 x 12.2 cm (image), Windsor Castle, Royal Collection Trust, RCIN 1005069.aa. (Detail of the page).

Grebe further notes in her analysis that the painters adhered more closely to their model when working from Dürer's prints as compared to works by other European artists. The painting in the album at Windsor, for example, is considered to be largely consistent with its source (Fig. 7). Grebe describes it as an "exact copy,"<sup>62</sup> while Verma states that Dürer's engraving was "copied line by line" in this instance.<sup>63</sup> Madhok goes so far as to suggest that the Mughal artist painted directly on the engraving itself.<sup>64</sup> This assumption would seem plausible in view of the almost identical dimensions of the two works, but has been refuted by means of technical examination.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, since the painting seems to be an attempt at a faithful reproduction, deviations from the "original" are sometimes even interpreted as errors. For example, Mario Bussagli argues that the painter was incapable of understanding the drapery of Mary's robe, and Grebe notes that he or she misinterpreted the band of pearls on the Virgin's forehead as the rim of a cap.<sup>66</sup> On closer inspection, however, the respective aims of Dürer's engraving and the court painter's interpretation seem to be quite distinct, even though both artists concentrate on the relationship between mother and child.

In Dürer's print, the seated Virgin holds the infant Jesus in front of her chest and tenderly tilts her head toward him, while the child self-confidently turns his head and looks out toward the viewer. Dürer shows Mary with a sorrowful facial expression, her eyes almost closed, her lips pressed together, and her chin muscle tensed. Since Dürer's small print was created for private devotion, the emotions of the Virgin are strongly emphasized.<sup>67</sup> Mary's loving

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62 Grebe, "Albrecht Dürer," 399. Grebe attests that "the artist meticulously reproduced not only the figures of Mary and Jesus, but also the setting with the tree and the fence." Grebe, "Albrecht Dürer," 396.

63 Verma, *Biblical Themes*, 46.

64 Madhok, "Christian-Islamic Relations," 69.

65 Infrared reflectography has shed light on the underdrawings and various compositional changes made during the painting process. See Emily Hannam, *Eastern Encounters: Four Centuries of Paintings and Manuscripts from the Indian Subcontinent* (Yorkshire: Royal Collection Trust, 2018), 82.

66 Mario Bussagli, *Indian Miniatures*, trans. Raymond Rudorff (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1969), 72; Grebe, "Albrecht Dürer," 396. On the other hand, Monica Juneja points out that the European concept of originality, or of the higher value of the original, had no purchase in Mughal art and that, in fact, the copy took precedence. See Juneja, "Braided Histories? Visuelle Praktiken des indischen Mogulreichs zwischen Mimesis und Alterität," *Historische Anthropologie* 16, no. 2 (2008): 187–204; 193.

67 From the late Middle Ages onwards, private devotional practices developed in Western Europe that were geared to inner contemplation and an emotional re-enactment of salvation history. Thus, it was precisely the secular character of the depiction and the close emotional connection between mother and child that suited its use as a devotional picture. See Schoch, Mende, and Scherbaum, *Albrecht Dürer*, 163.

affection is overshadowed by the foreboding of her son's future suffering, however. The coming Passion of Christ is signaled not through a symbolic object but, as in many other European depictions of the Madonna and Child, through the Virgin's countenance.<sup>68</sup> The Mughal artist, on the other hand, deliberately avoids the expression of sorrow. In his or her rendition, Mary, her eyes open enough for the pupil to be visible, does not ponder future suffering. Instead, she looks lovingly and somewhat dreamily at her son. Here too, the latter has turned his head; however, instead of addressing the viewer, he stares indistinctly into the distance.<sup>69</sup> Through these alterations in Christ's gaze and Mary's facial expression, the Mughal painter portrays the mother-child relationship as lighthearted, even restrainedly joyful.

The complete transformation of the picture's message is further achieved through details of the landscape. In Dürer's work, the mother and child are seated in a bleak and barren environment. Even the stones at the feet of the Virgin, crumbly and porous as they are, seem to reinforce the mood of desolation. The bench on which she is seated is made of rough wood and branches, and the wicker fence in the background, like the rest of the flora, appears gnarled and prickly. The dreariness of the landscape is further augmented by the cracked bark of the tree immediately above the mother's head. Compared to this scenario, the mood in the Windsor album is quite different: here, instead of a crack in its bark, the tree sprouts a branch whose leafy canopy provides shade for the pair seated below. In Mughal painting, such canopies, whether natural or artificial, function as classic motifs of dignity that help to distinguish important figures.<sup>70</sup> The cracked bark now appears in a much less prominent position, farther down and toward the edge of the picture. Additionally, a small body of water with plants can be seen at the feet of the

68 A well-known Christian symbol of the future Passion is the carnation. See, for example, Albrecht Dürer's *The Mother of God with the Carnation*, 1516, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Alte Pinakothek, Munich. However, Dürer's engraving *Madonna by the Tree* stems from the long tradition of representations of the sorrowful Virgin holding and kissing her child. See Ekkart Sauser, "Schmerzen Mariens," in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, vol. 4, *Allgemeine Ikonographie Saba, Königin von – Zypresse, Nachträge*, ed. Engelbert Kirschbaum, Günter Bandmann, and Wolfgang Braunfels (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2012), 85–87.

69 The change in the direction of the gaze is also of cultic-religious significance. The Hindu concept of *darśana*, which defines the relationship between deity and worshipper through the gaze, was also important for the Mughal court. By avoiding the direct exchange of gazes between the Christ Child and the viewer, the artist undermined the illusion of the real presence of the child and thus the image's status as an object of religious worship. On the significance of the concept of *darśana* for Mughal painting, see Juneja, "Translating the Body," 246–247.

70 The canopy or parasol belongs to the common insignia of Asian rulers. In pictures, they are sometimes even held by angels, as in *Shah Jahan on the Globe*, 1618–1619 in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., F1939.49a. Occasionally, it is a tree that seems to bend down to provide a roof for the central figure, as in *Mary and Joseph Travel to Bethlehem*, from a *Mir'āt al-quds* of Father Jerome Xavier (1602–1604), Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund, 2005.145.24.b.

Virgin, along with three medium-sized, compact stones overgrown with moss, and the wicker fence in the background is entwined by a flowering vine. The anonymous Mughal master thus transforms the desolate landscape of Dürer's engraving into a *locus amoenus*.

Far from being instances of fortuitous misunderstanding, such modifications indicate a deliberate reinterpretation and recasting of the European model. The Mughal artist was evidently well aware of the motifs in Dürer's print and their implicit meaning, for they punctiliously followed the guidelines of the Christian pictorial conventions even where the painter went beyond their monochromatic model by rendering Mary's robes in color: their treatment in blue and bright red accords with Western iconographic tradition.<sup>71</sup> However, the relative simplicity that characterizes the figures in the engraving must have been unsatisfactory in their eyes. Perhaps this is why the Mughal painter accentuated their religious significance by giving them discrete halos. The caption "the Holy Maryam and the Holy Isā" (*hasrate Maryam va hasrate Isā*) leaves little doubt about the subject of the picture and its indisputable holiness, but it was added to the album page only at a later stage. It is also worthwhile to note in this context that according to Islamic tradition Jesus did not die on the Cross; hence, Mary's sorrow for her son's eventual suffering makes no sense from a Muslim perspective.<sup>72</sup> The artist therefore simply modified, or omitted altogether, the qualities of facial expression and of setting that foreshadowed the Passion and promoted a strictly Christian interpretation of the image. In so doing, the Mughal artist deliberately recast the Christian Mary of Dürer's devotional print as a Muslim Maryam. A similar argument can also be made about the addition of the water at Mary's feet, which invites the viewer to interpret the painting as an illustration of the birth of Jesus.<sup>73</sup> According to the Quran (19:22–30), Mary had withdrawn into the desert to give birth to Jesus under the trunk of a palm tree. Immediately after his birth, Jesus is reported to have addressed his mother with the following words: "Do not grieve; your

71 Most depictions by Mughal artists follow the traditional color scheme of Mary's red garment and blue coat. However, this is not always the case, as for example in Basawan's "Mary and Child" (ca. 1590, San Diego Art Museum, Accession No.: 1990.293). Christian sources claim that Emperor Jahangir instructed his painters to ask the missionaries for the correct color scheme for the vestments of Christian figures. See Maclagan, *The Jesuits*, 238–239. However, the Jesuit Fathers' claimed authority over the correctness of religious imagery at the Mughal court seems to be questionable and might as well have stemmed from post-Reformation wishful thinking. In any case, the traditional coloring of Mary's robe is already found in the depiction of the "Annunciation" in the World History (*Jami' al-Tawarikh*) by the Ilkhanid statesman Rashid al-Din from 1314 (Edinburgh University Library, MS. Or. 20, f. 22r).

72 According to the Quran, Jesus was neither tortured nor crucified, the Jews and Christians being deceived about this. Quran 4:157–158.

73 The iconographic reference to the tradition of Maryam in the Quran is also mentioned by Hannam, *Eastern Encounters*, 82.

Lord has put a stream beneath you, and shake [*sic*] the trunk of the palm toward you to let fresh ripe dates fall by you.”<sup>74</sup> The small stream and the friendly vegetation can thus be read as iconographic clues that suggest the birth of Jesus. Indeed, in Islamic art traditions, especially in the illustrations of *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (The stories of the prophets) and *Fāl-nāma* (Book of omens), one sometimes finds depictions of the birth of Isā that are quite similar to this one.<sup>75</sup> A specific example that one may refer to in this regard is an image from a *Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* manuscript, created only a short time earlier by a Safavid painter in Persia (Fig. 8).<sup>76</sup>

One may therefore argue that despite assimilating many of the compositional elements from his or her European model, the Mughal painter turned the small Christian devotional picture into a decidedly Islamic one by overlaying the engraving with a relatively familiar Islamic iconography. From a theological perspective, the artist adhered to many of the shared beliefs between the Islamic and Christian traditions with respect to Mary and Jesus, but departed from the core message of the Christian image—namely, the mother’s sorrow for the future sacrifice of her son—in favor of an Islamic interpretation that emphasizes the holiness and divine blessing of Maryam and Isā. Precisely because the painting is such an obvious reception of a European image of the Virgin and Child, this alteration seems more like a correction of the Christian model than a mere reworking to suit Mughal tastes. A corresponding reinterpretation took place when the Virgin and Child pair was inserted into the frame of Jahangir’s Album. There too, similar adjustments were made to Mary’s facial expression, and as suggested by various details, such as the naturalistically rendered band of pearls on the Virgin’s forehead or the fur at the hem of her robe, this image was also directly based on Dürer’s engraving rather than on the Windsor painting.<sup>77</sup>

Like the Roman icon of Santa Maria Maggiore and Dürer’s devotional print, the works of the Mughal artists emerge as autonomous media for conveying religious meaning. In this respect, the reference to the Quran, established by means of a slight iconographic variation in the Windsor

74 Thomas Cleary, *The Qur’an: A New Translation* (n.p.: Starlatch Press), 19:24–25, 148.

75 One example from a *Fāl-nāma* is *Maryam and Isā*, Rotterdam, Collection Museum of Ethnology, In. 71803/29. See Luigi Bressan, *Maria nella devozione e nella pittura dell’Islam* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2011), 82; and Rachel Milstein, Karin Rührdanz, and Barbara Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1999), 156–157.

76 The manuscript containing this painting is Safavid in origin but was probably in the Mughal court at the time of Emperor Jahangir at the latest. See Milstein et al., *Stories of the Prophets*, 203; Bressan, *Maria nella devozione*, 85–86.

77 In detaching the mother and child pair from the original pictorial context, the painter was so consistent that he even omitted the left part of Mary’s upper garment, which, without the depiction of the bench, would probably have been perceived as inexplicable.

painting, is maybe even less important than the changed orientation of the Madonnas in the Mughal albums. The altered lines of sight and the modified mood of the scenery may even change the (devotional) relationship that the viewer establishes with the figures depicted. The Muslim renderings of Virgin and Child are not about compassion, but rather about holiness and veneration. This is accentuated by the style of the painting, which Verma, Amaladass, and Löwner have described as “idealized.”<sup>78</sup> The adoption of such a stylistic idiom cannot simply be considered a matter of taste and tradition, for it also encompasses the Mughal artist’s reduction of Dürer’s chiaroscuro contrast, of the depths in the folds of the garment, and of the complexity of the lines. There is reason enough to believe that these choices, which significantly attenuate the drama of the painting, were made after careful consideration. The resulting pictorial representations have a quieter and softer surface, which, on a semantic level, emphasizes the integrity and sanctity of the figures. Stylistic decisions therefore play a cardinal role here in transforming the religious meaning of the European model that the Mughal artist worked from.



**Fig. 8** Aqa Riza-i-Abbasi (attr.), *The Nativity*, ca. 1595, opaque watercolor on paper; from: *Naysābūrī, Qīṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, Quazwin, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, supplément persan 1313, f. 174.

78 Verma, *Biblical Themes*, 46. See also Amaladass and Löwner, *Christian Themes*, 68.

## Conclusion

The aim of the foregoing analysis was to demonstrate that Mughal court artists had a keen awareness of how religious meaning could be conveyed pictorially. This not only enabled them to understand the Christian images they worked from but also to reflect and comment on, and ultimately to change, the religious meaning of their models by means of pictorial quotations and iconographic and stylistic adaptations. In this respect, their works reflect the general intellectual openness and tolerance toward various religions and cults that was characteristic of the Mughal court under Akbar and Jahangir. Parallel to the theological disputes among religious teachers that largely revolved around the scriptures, Mughal court painting was a distinct forum for the artists to negotiate religious differences and conjunctions. The Mughal artists were indeed veritable masters in conducting such transreligious discourse in the languages of discrete pictorial traditions.<sup>79</sup> Their arguments, however, are often hidden in small iconographic elements, in visual quotations, and stylistic nuances. The present article has tried to highlight the necessity and exegetic significance of attending to these features, which confirm Aby Warburg's famous dictum, "*Der liebe Gott steckt im Detail*" (God dwells in the details).

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79 I use the term "transreligious" by analogy to the concept of transculturality. A transreligious approach assumes that boundaries between religious traditions are fluid and that religions are not internally homogeneous but diverse. Within this framework, artistic negotiation, adaptation, and translation of religiously significant motifs can impact the respective traditions and create something new. For a definition of transreligious processes, see Anne Hege Grung, "Inter-Religious or Trans-Religious," *Journal of Inter-Religious Studies* 13 (2014): 11–14; for a transreligious theology, see Roland Faber, "Der transreligiöse Diskurs: Zu einer Theologie transformativer Prozesse," *Polylog* 9 (2002): 65–94.