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Historical background of fauna in Islamic and Mughal Miniature Painting: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the growth of zoomorphic images from prehistoric cave paintings to the distinguished animal portraiture of the Mughal miniature custom. It traces the figurative and stylistic connection of animal representation across various civilizations including Egyptian, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, Sassanian and Indo-Persian. This article highlights the dominant role of fauna in religious, cultural, and in decorative settings. Special emphasis is given on Islamic and Mughal eras where zoomorphic depictions not only reproduce aesthetic benefits but also function as symbols of power, royal ideology, and naturalistic thoughts.

Keywords: Zoomorphic, Islamic Art, Indo-Persian Aesthetics, Miniature Painting, Fauna, Decorative, Sassanian, Symbolism, Cultural Transmission.

Objectives of the study are

1. To examine the evolution of faunal iconography in art from prehistoric to Mughal periods.
2. To investigate the symbolic, ornamental, and narrative uses of animal motifs in Islamic and Mughal miniature painting.
3. To explore the artistic influences of Sasanian, Byzantine, Persian, and Central Asian traditions on Islamic and Mughal animal painting.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology founded on historical analysis and visual interpretation. Secondary sources, such as online historical texts (e.g., Kitāb al-Ḥayawān, Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh) and scholarly publications, are used to trace the stylistic development and symbolic roles of faunal imagery throughout history. To decipher the meanings and stylistic characteristics of specific eras, iconographic reading and cultural contextualization are used. This in-depth analysis will facilitate future researchers' consultation and knowledge of the fauna's importance in the arts of the decades.

Historical Analysis

In the pre-historic age art was zoomorphic in nature. Examples of such representations are found in caves of Altamira from Spain and Lascaux in France. This is very clearly understood from the found in (Ministry of Culture France, 2024). It may be stated that the drawings from

fauna in the then art have had existential ends. Those artists depicted hunting scenes in which an animal would be seen to have been shot by an arrow. Being ignorant of agriculture they largely depended on animals for their survival. Their basic needs of life like food, clothing (animal hide), and other such needs were met from animals (Witts, 2022). Animal fats were used for lighting.

Even though with the march of events man got advancement in social organization and in technology but even then he was dependant to greater extent on animals for the fulfilment of his various fundamental needs (Rice, 1975). This explains the dominance of animal figures in drawings and carvings of ancient Egyptian, Roman and Greek civilization (Witts, 2022). When Constantine, the Roman emperor, embraced Christianity, the Roman art underwent a decline as did his empire. The subsequent civilization, which emerged in the Eastern Roman Empire, is known as Byzantine and late Roman or early Christian art came into vogue. Later on the early Christian art drifted into Byzantine art. So far even in these iconographic changes, zoomorphic pattern now stylized and symbolic sustained to flourish (Fiorentino, 2021).

Equivalent developments outspread beyond east. The disposal of animals and birds in friezes within roundels imitating jewelled band again represent a Sassanian fashion. In Sassanian art, 'Bactrian' variety or the two humped camels appear, which probably came from Soghdia which attests links with the North-west in the Byzantine and the North-East in Sassanian empires. Later on these camels are also depicted in the Mughal miniature paintings (Sabeti & Mafitabar, 2020; Shabestari & Firoozhei, 2024).

It is generally believed that figurative art is prohibited in Islam, which is a great misconception (Kamel Abd El-Raouf, 2022). It is true that many famous Muslim personalities disliked the use of representational art in Islamic architecture as at that time buildings were decorated with calligraphic and abstract art, but some Muslim patrons allowed painting in the form of living things in very specific circumstances. This happened when rapidly growing Muslim polity displaced Byzantine law in southern Palestine (634 CE) and Sassanian power in Mesopotamia (636 CE), Islamic art immersed both legacies.

On the time when Muhammad (S.A.W) died in 634 A.D, His (S.A.W) followers were in the control of Macca, Madina and that of Western Arabia. Soon after, Muslim Arabs conquered the great empire of Byzantine at Ajnadayn (southern Palestine) in 634 A.D, and that of Sassanians at Qadisyra (Southern Mesopotamia) in 636 A. D. The Islamic empire extended up to Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The Muslims of the time were till directed by the four Caliphs of the time but soon after them, Amir Muawiyah founded the Omayyad dynasty from 661 till 750 A.D, with their Capital at Damascus, remain a great centre of art and trade during the Byzantine era. The main inspirational eras for Omayyad were Hellenistic and Christian art sources and practises.

A new reigning dynasty known as the Abbasids, who moved the capital from Damascus to Baghdad in 750 A.D., succeeded the Omayyads. Both the Byzantines and the Sassanians had a significant influence on Mesopotamia before it was converted to Islam. However, Islamic art and architecture are heavily influenced by Sassanian culture. Many Omayyad and Abbasid monarchs eventually adopted their court rituals; in particular, the fresco paintings of the Omayyad's palace at Qasral, Amra, were influenced by the art of Ctesiphon (Wan & Jiang, 2023).

Zoomorphic decoration was also encouraged by the Abbasids throughout their rule (750–1258).

Iraq replaced Syria as the center of Islamic political and cultural life when Baghdad, the circle city of peace (medina al-salaam), was made the capital.

Samara, a different city in the north of Baghdad, was later founded by the Abbasids. Both Baghdad and Samarra served as the commercial and cultural hub of the Islamic world throughout the first three centuries of Abbasid rule. Islamic art and architecture were significantly impacted by the unique style and innovative techniques that arose during this time and spread throughout the Muslim world. Additionally, the Abbasids demonstrated their significant contribution to the advancement of architecture and art. Their contribution to architecture includes great mosques and beautiful palaces of that period (Rice, 1975). Unbaked bricks were the most common building material, but baked bricks were also used in architecture, decorated with marble, teak wood and stucco. Some best examples were, The layout of Al-Mu'tasim's palace, Jausaq al-Khaqani, also known as the Dar-al-Khalifa, was genuinely monumental. (Al- Janabi, 1983). The wall paintings of the palace show the luxurious royal life pleasures – music, hunting, dancing etc (Met Museum, 2025; Smart history, 2024). Fresco buon paintings discovered in the harem were in Syrian and Sassanian style, in which predatory eagles and startled hares set in the middle of the cornucopia scrolls were depicted. There were also friezes of rampant lion, oxen and stags, grouse, ducks and partridges. Diapers of hearts, scales, mesh, chequers and fleuron in grey rich colours scattered everywhere. The palace's chambers were not only decorated with paintings, but also with engraved plaster dados, carved marble cornices, and a paneled ceiling of golden teakwood. Examples can be found in the palace inside, where walls were decorated with paintings in stucco work. Birds and animals were shown separately, and large panels ornamented with dots representing pearls- a favourite Sassanian motif often used for textiles–have also been used. The artists of that period were close observers of animals and their peculiar characteristics. The Persian or the Seljuk components are important in the amusing pictures denoted the Eastern Isles, conspicuously in the rendering of human heads of the birds and beasts. This is the most attractive painting of the Mesopotamian school.

Aside from these, some of the best ornamental stylization can be seen in an animal picture book, the Kitab-al-Hayawan, where the flora and animals are completely stylized and the supreme quality of the image resides in the beautifully brilliant coloring. This illustrated copy includes 31 miniature paintings that depict not only artistic finery but also the Abbasid period's rich logical culture.

Caliph AlMansur established a new capital on the banks of the Tigris River in 762, and it quickly evolved into one of the world's largest towns. In 836 A.D., Caliph AlMu'tasim moved the capital to Samarra. The Abbasids began to lose control of the empire's outlying parts for a variety of causes, with local dynasties establishing practical independence: Samanids in the north, Tulunids, Aghlabids, and Omayyad of Spain in the west; Saffarids in the south; and Buyids and Ghaznavids in the east. In 889, the caliph AlMu'tamid, Baghdad's only effective ruler at the time, returned his capital to the city. In 945, the Buyids, who practice Shia Islam, became effective rulers as amirs, but the Abbasid caliph retained his formal title. With caliph Al-Nasir (1179-1225) the Abbasids once again gained control of Iraq, but the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 brought the Abbasid caliphate to an end.

In 1258 A.D the Mongol reign was established in the whole eastern world from China to Syria and lasted till 1335 A.D. The Mongol invasion and subsequent domination brought Chinese artists to Persia and a new form of school came into being known as the Mongol school of miniature paintings. Best examples of the time were *Manafi-al-Hayawan* (usefulness of animals) of Ibn-e-Bakhtishu, completed in Maragha in 1291 A.D, with a Persian transcript, has miniature paintings revealing the two styles. The miniature paintings of the Paris *Jami-al-Tawarikh*, are the archetypes of all the miniature paintings created during the whole of 14 century and the beginning of 15, century (Zen in Early Persian Painting, 2024). Since then nothing was added to art until fresh Chinese influence. During Timur's, reign more details were introduced from the East and Persian painting became mature. His sons and grandsons were amongst the greatest and most enthusiastic supporters of miniature painting. Ustad "Gung the Dumb" is regarded as the founder of the Timurid School (Rice :1971). From 1450 A.D the Herat School of art was dominated by an extraordinary artist, Kamal ud din Bihzad Painter Bihzad's famous miniature painting, Bahram Gur slaughtering the Dragon (Pl.No.20) and another is of a combat scene with camels. They represent the most delicate features of his work and are less angular and less stern than some of his later works.

The most comical miniature picture is one by painter Mirak, a Bihzad disciple, depicting the Shah and his Vizier Nausherwan listening to owls in a ruined palace at night). The bird's speech was understood by the minister and he tells the Shah that one of the owls is saying that if the Shah sustained his present policy, the owl would be able to offer a nice gift of devastated palaces to his family. The representation of birds as symbolic envoys in Persian miniature painting, such as Mirak's depiction of owls conveying a moral warning, reproduces the cultural and artistic exchanges that far ahead influenced the Indian subcontinent over early interactions with Persia and beginning with ancient civilizations.

The Indus Valley Civilization, dating back to 1750 B.C, is one of the world's oldest civilization s located along the Indus River. Achmaenians, who were Persians, conquered some parts of the subcontinent in 6th century B.C. Due to this assault, a link between Persia and the Sub-continent was created. The first western influence occurred in this section of the world when Alexander the Great occupied it in 327 B.C. Chandra Gupta Maury founded the Mauryan dynasty in 305 B.C. (Ingholt, 1957). His grandson Ashoka, 232 B.C., was a prominent promoter of art and architecture.. During the reign of Ashoka strong relations were established with Persia. Traces can be seen in paintings of Ajanta cave at Maharashtra in India, date back to 3rd century A.D. Paintings on the walls of Ajanta caves shows close observation of nature study, accurate measurement and complete art of anatomy in colours .It has sweet clover Rhizomes along with birds, animals and water spirits as major decorative designs.

Many Muslim Invaders including, Mohammad bin Qasim, an Arab Muslim, invaded the Sub-Continent in 712 A.D. After him an Afghan leader Subuktagin (977 A.D) throne the area. Mehmood of Ghazna subjugated this area in 998 A.D .From 1000 A.D onward; many Muslim aggressors came to the sub-continent, generally from Central Asia via Afghanistan . Shahab-udDin Ghauri made his appearance from Central Asia in 1186 A.D. (Khan 1991). In 1206, he was succeeded by his Turkish slave Qutb-ud-Din Aibak, who established the slave dynasty. Alauddin Khilji, another Central Asian leader, took control of the Indian subcontinent around 1290 A.D. (Brown:1981). In 1320 A.D., India fell under the rule of Tughlaqs, who were also Central Asian.. The Syeds came into power for a short period of time in 1414 A.D .They were

followed by the Lodhis. Ibrahim Lodhi was later on ousted by Babar in 1526 A.D. Babar founded a great Mughal Empire. Sher Shah Suri, an Afghan leader, interrupted the Mughal rule for a short period of time but Humayun soon regained his lost empire. The Mughals maintained the relations between Persia and the Indian sub-continent. Such works travelled east with Bābur's heirs, preparing the ground for the Mughal style. Although Babur had many painters in his court, but no major effort can be seen in order to develop the art of painting in his domain.

His successor Humayun may also be regarded as the true creator of the Mughal School of Painting. During his fourteen-year exile in Persia, he encountered painters such as Mir Sayyid Ali Tabrizi and Khwaja Abdul Samad Shirazi, both of whom were Bihzad's students. Later, Humayun brought both of them to India. In addition to Central Asian ideals, Persian traditions inspired local artistic activity. Such concerns can be recognized in the presence of various examples, such as those seen in Mughal miniature paintings. Miniature painting is typically defined as a little painting with painstaking and delicate craftsmanship. Patralekhanas, or palm leaf illuminations, was a medieval Indian art form. Under the supervision of Jahangir the art of painting reached its zenith.

During Shah Jahan's reign, both architecture and painting blossomed (Financial Times, 2025). Aurangzeb succeeded Shah Jahan as monarch, and instead of painting, he became interested in calligraphy. Thus, due to a lack of interest and patronage, painters began migrating to the area of their interest, where they lived and received patronage from their new masters. Under the prevailing circumstances, when Mughal miniature painting entered the court of neighbouring states, it sank with local values, resulting in the formation of a new school of paintings known as the "Provincial School of Painting". The Mughal School of Miniature Painting was primarily influenced by Central Asian, Persian, Chinese, Western, and local (Indian) traditions. As a result of cultural interactions, a new school of painting was established, known as the Mughal School of Miniature Painting.

Aside from technique, artistic approach, and colouring scheme, another essential subject of Mughal miniature painting is ornamentation, such as floral, geometrical embellishment, human portrayal, and animal depiction. Among the Mughal emperors, Jahangir's reign is regarded as the golden age of Mughal miniature paintings. Jahangir, often known as the painter king of the subcontinent, was particularly fond of bird and animal portraiture. Although Shah Jahan was interested in art, he focused on construction rather than other forms of embellishment.

Significance of the Study

This study emphasizes the longstanding contextual and metaphorical significance of fauna in art and culture throughout civilizations, particularly in Islamic and Mughal traditions. The study deepens our grasp of cultural transmission, imperial aesthetics, and symbolic lexicon in art history.

Conclusion:

From prehistoric cave murals to the sophisticated aesthetics of Mughal miniature painting, animals have always played an important symbolic and visual role in human artistic imagination. Islamic and Mughal artists, particularly those under benefactors such as Jahangir, enhanced this tradition by mixing scientific observation with cultural iconography. The evolution of animal imagery from religious symbols to imperial emblems to naturalistic studies reflects large

er transformations in political, spiritual, and aesthetic sensibilities over empires and centuries.

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