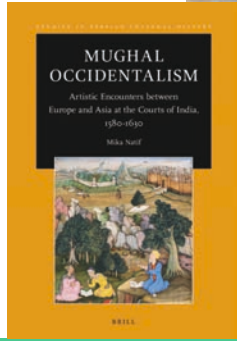


Mughal occidentalism

Catherine B. Asher



Reviewed title

Mughal Occidentalism: Artistic Encounters Between Europe and Asia at the Court of India, 1580-1630

Mika Natif. 2018.

Leiden and Boston: Brill
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This book concerns the encounter between western mode of image making and the artistic output by artists of the Mughal court between the 1580 and 1630. Mika Natif's goal is to reconsider this complex issue which has long fascinated scholars. Rather than see Mughal painting as a simple result of courtly interest in western modes of artistic depiction, she argues that Mughal contact with the west occurred on multiple levels. Her text probes these contacts giving Indian artists more agency than done in previous scholarship. Her goal is to present a balance between the role of the patron and the insight of artists. Before defining her own choice of the title and term Mughal Occidentalism she details how previous scholars have used the term occidentalism. She also provides examples of how western art and its motifs have been employed throughout Islamic artistic production prior to the Mughal period. She sees in the Mughal case that the use of occidentalism is not pure copying but that these are cases of cross-cultural use. This book is a welcome addition to the

many books on Mughal painting that have appeared in recent years. Here we see a more clearly defined link between Akbar's policy of toleration and European elements in paintings than has been suggested in previous works.

This volume opens with a detailed study of Akbar's policy of *sulh-i kull* (peace with all) and its adoption by Akbar's successor, Jahangir. This policy of tolerance is the key, Natif argues, to the Mughals' acceptance of European and particularly Jesuit presence at court. She suggests that Europeans, rather than seen as a wildly foreign element, were considered as part of the varied multi-cultural multi-ethnic landscape of South Asia. She also suggests, as have others, that Akbar and Jahangir may well have been aware of differences between the subcontinent and Europe through the material culture they acquired as gifts as well as political and economic reports through envoys.

This concern with *sulh-i kull* and encounters with Europeans shifts to a consideration of primary sources. Here Natif rightly warns the reader to not take European accounts,

especially those of the Jesuits, literally, for as she argues, examples cited are often tropes for conversion found in Jesuit texts from China to Latin America. Part of the issue is what the Jesuits wanted to believe; another part was their incomprehension of Mughal tradition.

The Jesuits, as is well-known, brought gifts to win favor with the Mughal emperors. Among those most cited by scholars is the multi-volume Polyglot Bible whose illustrations have been seen as the source of much Mughal Occidental visual content. However, Natif argues that we do not know how long this Bible stayed in the Mughal court for it may have been returned to the Jesuits. Even if it had remained she questions whether a single source can be linked to Mughal Occidentalism, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of links between European sources and Mughal output.

Natif also discussed depictions of Mary and Jesus once seen on palace walls and today in paintings in museum collections. Her conclusion that such imagery is dynastic in meaning is not new, but she argues her case well. Following this is a discussion of transmission and copying in the royal workshop. Here Natif considers three Mughal paintings which clearly are modeled on well-known European masterpieces. She posits that the artists of these works, two females and one male, were not copying at all but recoding the style, identity, technique, and subject matter (p.84). Natif's analysis for these illustrations is brilliant, removing all the original Christian context and meaning, replacing it with meaning that is specific to the Persianate world and relates to each work's inscriptional content. It would be instructive to see her observations extended to other Mughal paintings often assumed to be poor or inaccurate copies of western art. Can her conclusions apply to all paintings in which elements of Mughal Occidentalism occur or are these examples limited?

Renaissance prints were adapted in two different manners. One is the cutting of parts of a European print and incorporating them into a Mughal album page. The other is including articles found in European art work and including them into a Mughal painting. Here Natif focuses on two particular articles: globes and organs. She argues effectively that both these modes change the article's original meaning – Christian most of the time – into an image associated with reason and just rule. Often her explanations involve complex

levels of understanding indicating a high level of intellectual engagement for patron and painter alike.

Landscape as Mughal allegory for the virtuous city and ideal Mughal governance is another focus. Natif argues that around the 1580s, concurrent with the adaptation of *sulh-i kull*, receding distance landscapes, akin to those found in northern European painting, begin to be incorporated into paintings of a non-historical nature. These landscapes are not found in pages of the Akbarnama or other histories relating to the Mughal house, but in manuscripts such as the Kulliyat of Sa'adi or the Khamsa of Nizami. Not only does the appearance of these landscapes parallel the rise of *sulh-i kull* they also are executed during a time when Tusi's Akhlaqi Nasiri (Ethics of Nasiri) was extremely popular. Nasiri promoted the concept of the Virtuous City akin to the ideal world seen in these landscapes. European landscape is adapted as were objects and images of Jesus and Mary for specific Mughal ideological ends.

Diverse types of Mughal portraiture that developed during the late-16th century. Portraiture in Mughal India had multiple purposes. It ranged from the practical to the spiritual; some were made as diplomatic gifts and others were worn by the elite to signify their devotion to the ruler. Natif suggests that the goal of the portraitist was to reveal a man's outer appearance and inner soul. Artists focused attention on detail and used European techniques of light, shade, depth and profile-views to indicate the prowess and nobility of the Mughal subject. The Mughals, like other cultures, used portraiture to indicate their superiority over lesser dynasties and enemies of the state. Natif does not address this commonality in the practice of portraiture across cultures and it would be interesting to hear her views on this.

This volume is beautifully illustrated with over 100 color plates. Natif shows her erudition in her extensive citations revealing a profound knowledge of both Mughal and Islamic painting in general. This book is a must read for anyone interested in Mughal art, kingship and concepts of state. Perhaps not everyone will agree with all of Natif's arguments but certainly, she has given us new and exciting ways to think about Renaissance art in the Mughal milieu.

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Mosque in Indonesia. Image reproduced under a creative commons license, courtesy of M. Timur on Flickr.

Two pivotal events led to the increased role of official ulama in the governing affairs of Indonesia and Malaysia: the wave of Islamic resurgence in the late 1970s and the Asian financial crisis in 1997. These critical junctures opened the door to a more competitive political environment, which ramped up participation of various civil society actors, including ulama and Islamic political activists, many of whom penetrated into the inner sanctum of the state in order to effect changes from within. Despite the empowerment of official ulama in both countries, especially after 1997, their objectives in exploiting the state apparatuses as a means to express their authority differ starkly. Official ulama in Malaysia use their

state-endowed coercive powers as a way to consolidate their authority, sometimes to the point of defying the wish of the regime. Official ulama in Indonesia, by contrast, find themselves in a tenuous position to seek recognition for their authority in the post-authoritarian era, namely to break away from their 'rubberstamp' (stempel pemerintah) label and compete with other Islamic mass organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. In short, the empowerment of official ulama in Malaysia allows them to establish their own power base that is immune to influences from the society, which is not the case for their counterparts in Indonesia.

The rise of official ulama in Indonesia and Malaysia also coincides with two interrelated

socio-economic factors: the sizeable group of middle-class Muslims and the neo-liberal economic policies. The white-hot economic growth rate especially in the decades leading up to the 1997 Asian financial crisis has produced a significant population of largely conservative middle-class Muslims, who require the culture of modern consumption to accommodate their strict religious way of life. The demand, in turn, creates a niche in the economy for syariah-compliant consumer activities to thrive, in particular the halal-certification of food and beverages and Islamic banking and finance. The new market niche provides lucrative opportunity for the official ulama to become actors in the capitalist economy, chiefly to exploit the insecurities of conservative middle-class Muslims who are looking for the official certainty that their material consumption does not run afoul of their religious beliefs. It is within this socio-economic context that the authority of official ulama in Malaysia and Indonesia resonates the strongest.

While the book is meticulous and systematic in structuring its argument, enriched by a host of elite interviews, it under-discusses some aspects of political Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia that the reviewer believes warrant more emphasis in order to provide a holistic narrative of ulama authority in these two countries. In Malaysia, electoral calculation played a crucial role in moderating the Islamic views of the former Barisan Nasional-led federal government, which then constrains the authority of the official ulama. The United Malay National Organisation, the political patron of official ulama in Malaysia, had to take into account

the religious sensitivities of Barisan Nasional's Borneo component parties, lest it would squander the electoral vote bank it had long depended on to remain in power. The haphazard way the former Barisan Nasional government dealt with the Malay bible hullabaloo and its obvious foot-dragging when it came to passing the RU355 (the so-called hudud law) proved this point. In Indonesia, while the author does discuss the tussle between the Ulama Council of Indonesia and the Ministry of Religious Affairs on the issue of halal certification, the discussion on institutional tensions can be made more salient by adding the fact that the two institutions also diverge widely in ideological orientation, with the Ulama Council of Indonesia being more religiously conservative and dogmatic than the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Apropos to the author's argument, the institutional fragmentation divided along ideological fault line can help to explain the weakness of the Ulama Council of Indonesia's authority vis-à-vis other agencies of the state.

In all, this book is a welcome addition to the comparative study of political Islam in two Muslim-majority countries in Southeast Asia. Not many books have been written that compare these two countries in an equal, empathetic, and substantive manner, and Saat's book is one of the very few that strive to fill this knowledge lacuna. In this regard the author has done splendidly in explicating the differences between the two countries despite their many shared characteristics.

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