

MASTERPIECE OF MASTERPIECES

*Sultans of Deccan India, 1500-1700:
Opulence and Fantasy*
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
New York
20 April - 26 July 2015
Reviewed by Thomas Murray

Long in preparation, 'Sultans of Deccan India, 1500-1700' at the Met, is better for all the time spent. After more than one careful viewing and study of the catalogue, it is clear that the subtitle 'Opulence and Fantasy' is a grand understatement.

This rich exhibition was first conceived ten years ago by then Islamic department head, Daniel Walker. It has been brought to fruition by a team including Navina Haidar (curator of Islamic art), Marika Sardar (associate curator of southern Asian and Islamic art, San Diego Museum of Art) and senior MMA research associate Courtney Stewart. It shows that there is more to being a successful curator than displaying expertise in history, geography, geology, politics, militia, textiles, paintings, sculpture, architecture, jewellery, metalwork, coinage, book making, calligraphy, trade, religion and migration, to name but a few of the areas covered. You also need to know where the great pieces are sleeping, exercise diplomatic skill to borrow them, access no trivial amount of financial resources to move them, and copious amounts of time to pull so many masterpieces from so many sources. The lenders list is a who's who of Indian and Islamic art from around the world.

The art of the Deccan, which occupies the Indian Peninsula's 'broad midsection', flourished in the 16th and 17th centuries. Diamonds displayed at the entrance are symbolic of this golden age of wealthy sultanates. Until mines opened in Africa and



elsewhere, Golconda was their primary source. I suspect all of us grew up with romantic stories of 'gems plucked from the third eye of an idol'. These could well be those.

Deccani nobility commissioned lavish miniature paintings of many subjects, including portraits, which offer great insight into court life.

1 *Illumination in the Form of a Vase*, Bijapur, early 17th century. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 25 x 17 cm (10 x 6")

2 *Folios from a manuscript of Jaswant Singh of Jodhpur's Aporaksha-siddantha*,

Aurangabad, 1669. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 50 x 44 cm (19 x 17")

3 Panel from a tent lining, Burhanpur, circa 1665. Mordant- and resist-dyed and painted cotton, 262 x 127 cm (87" x 42"). MMA 31.82.3



2

Fascinating cross-cultural pollinators included Persian, African and later European enclaves and influences. The unique hand of some painters are recognisable, if not named, among the anonymous artists, with attribution handles like the Dublin, Bodleian and Bikaner Painters. Their genius is recognised centuries later in a far distant land.

These works of art are especially interesting to textile lovers because of the extraordinary detail in the costumes, carpets and elephant drapery, as well as shared depictions of geometric and floral patterns on palace wall backdrops. I favoured the Ashmolean Museum's 17th century 'Illumination in the Form of a Vase' that was a tour de force of penmanship in the textile decoration oeuvre (1).

Speaking of textiles, what a delight to find on view some of the very finest *kalamkari*s (from the Persian word for pen) ever made. Produced in the mid 17th century, these hand-painted, mordant- and resist-dyed cotton cloths, portrayed Persian, European and Indian subjects and served as royal tent hangings. A trio of these masterpieces entered the MMA collection in 1928, and were enhanced by wonderful related examples from the V&A collection, all showing the layering of decorative detail, portrait potency and a narrative of wealth and privilege.

But what was perhaps my favourite textile (2), shared an aesthetic and underlying philosophy with folios from a manuscript showing botanical



3

illustrations of a flower with three blossoms, from Jaswant Singh of Jodhpur's *Aporaksha-siddhanta* (?). This brought to mind the Roman philosopher Seneca's universal truth; 'All art is but imitation of nature'. These two great works of art are emblematic of the show itself; how great it is that all these rare, important and visually compelling works of art have been brought

together, each brilliant in its own right, but the whole of the exhibit truly greater than the sum of its parts. The curators have created a masterpiece from masterpieces.

Also on view but now closed were a show of photographs of Burma and India by Capt Linneaus Tripe, and, in the Islamic Galleries, 'Bazm and Razm: Feast and Fight in Persian Art'.