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Architectural Representation in Mughal Miniature Painting: A Study of Spatial Composition, Built Forms, and Cultural Context

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Abstract

Mughal miniature painting is one of the most important traditions of the visual arts in South Asia, combining high aesthetics with stories about history, culture, society, and architecture. The latter constitutes an important part of Mughal miniature painting because it serves as more than just a decorative background; it becomes the crucial element used to communicate space, hierarchy, identity, and narrative. The current research aims to discuss the depiction of architecture in Mughal miniature painting, paying special attention to spatial composition, built forms, and their cultural context. Specifically, the research intends to analyze the depiction of palaces, forts, gardens, pavilions, mosques, and tombs; to explore the connection between the architectural environment and narrative scenes; and to study the impact of Mughal architectural traditions on miniature painting. For that purpose, selected examples of Mughal miniature paintings depicting various architectural settings are studied through the qualitative visual and comparative analysis. Various architectural elements, spatial arrangements, perspectives, scale, symmetry, decorations, and positioning of human figures are analyzed in order to understand the visual and narrative roles of the depicted forms. The analysis shows that the architectural structures played an important role in setting up the geographical and social settings, communicating the royal power, organizing narrative scenes, and conveying the cultural and religious values. Palaces and forts often served as representations of the imperial power and social hierarchy, whereas gardens, pavilions, mosques, and tombs conveyed the aesthetic, spiritual, and ceremonial aspects of Mughal culture. At the same time, it is possible to conclude that miniature painters borrowed architectural language from the traditions of Mughal, Persian, Central Asian, and Indian architecture and transformed it according to pictorial conventions.

Keywords: Mughal miniature painting, Mughal architecture, architectural representation, spatial composition, visual culture, built forms, cultural context.

Introduction

The tradition of Mughal miniature painting constitutes one of the most advanced examples of courtly art in the history of the Indian subcontinent, emerging from the 16th century onwards as a result of continuous dialogue between the conventions of Persian art and indigenous Indian pictorial practice. The foundation of Mughal imperial workshops has allowed providing



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organized institutional context for painters, calligraphers, illuminators, and manuscript makers, especially during the time of Akbar's reign. Early Mughal miniature painting has been greatly affected by Persian artistic traditions passed down to India through the Timurid and Safavid cultural areas, but these traditions have been gradually transformed due to the involvement of Indian artists, native themes, local landscapes, and indigenous decorative techniques (Beach, 1978; Welch, 1963). The illustrated manuscripts of Akbar's times reflect the process of cultural amalgamation, which combines the traditions of Persian literature and Indian history. Jahangir's epoch is associated with the development of the more naturalistic and refined approach in miniature paintings while under Shah Jahan's patronage there has been a growing emphasis on elegance, symmetry, ceremonial scenes, and architectural splendor (Minissale, 2001; Koch, 1997).

The art of architecture holds a unique place in this visual tradition as the constructed environment often served as the setting in the depiction of events and scenes painted in the Mughal miniatures. Thus, palaces, forts, audience halls, gardens, pavilions, mosques, tombs, gates, terraces, balconies, domes, arches, and courtyards were used in paintings illustrating royal ceremonies, historical events, military activities, religious congregations, literary stories, and daily events at the court (Asher, 1992; Ray, 2018). However, these elements of architecture played a role in addition to serving as merely decorative settings as they aided in establishing the location of the depicted scene, organizing the movement of people, showing social hierarchy and stressing the political or cultural importance of the story. For instance, royal palaces and audience halls could stress imperial authority and hierarchy at the court, while forts and gates could show military or territorial context (Koch, 2014; Minissale, 2001). Likewise, gardens and pavilions could express ideas of leisure, refinement, paradise, and controlled nature, while mosques and tombs could create a religious or commemorative context.

The architectural vocabulary that featured in Mughal miniature painting reflected the cultural synthesis on which the architectural tradition of Mughal architecture itself was based. The architectural tradition of Mughal architecture arose due to the influence of Persian, Timurid, Central Asian, and Indian elements, and thus, an architectural language emerged with domes, arches, courtyards, gardens, waterways, pavilions, geometric layouts, and elaborate ornamentation (Asher, 1992; Koch, 2014). Persianate and Timurid traditions were important sources of inspiration for monumental planning, garden layout, symmetry, and imperial architecture, whereas the craftsmen, materials, construction methods, ornamentation, and architectural traditions of India were equally crucial to the development of Mughal architecture (Blair & Bloom, 1995; Necipoğlu, 2019). All these architectural traditions were then transferred to the miniature paintings in an adapted and reassembled form. Thus, the architecture became a vehicle of imperial power, dynasty, cultural sophistication, religion, and social status while also serving as the backdrop of narration (Koch, 1997; Minissale, 2001). Therefore, architectural painting should be studied not just from the point of view of artistic



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technique but also from the perspective of the way Mughal society understood architecture, power, culture, and identity.

Despite numerous studies of Mughal miniature painting from various perspectives such as royal patronage, manuscript illumination, portraiture, naturalism, iconography, and stylistic evolution, architectural representation should be studied in more detail as an autonomous visual, spatial, and narrative phenomenon (Beach, 1978; Welch, 1997). The existing research on Mughal architecture mostly focuses on surviving monuments, architecture chronology, patronage, gardens, and cross-cultural interaction of Persianate and Indian architectural traditions, whereas the issue of architectural representation in miniature painting still deserves thorough exploration (Koch, 2014; Necipoğlu, 2019). In this regard, the current research seeks to explore the visual representation of principal architectural types including palaces, forts, gardens, pavilions, mosques, and tombs and pay special attention to the spatial and narrative aspects of architectural representation in miniature paintings. The research also addresses such aspects of architecture as spatial organization and establishment of place, hierarchy, historical context, and cultural meaning. It aims at exploring how Mughal architectural traditions affected visual representation in miniature painting. It is supposed to show that miniature paintings can serve as an important source in the study of the interrelation between architecture, narration, imperial ideology, and cultural identity in early modern South Asia (Minissale, 2001; Rathore, 2025).

Materials and Methods

Research Design

The current study employs a qualitative, descriptive, visual, and art-historical research design that explores the representation of architecture in Mughal miniature painting. It is reasonable to apply a qualitative research method, as the study is going to interpret visual features, architectural forms, spaces, their narrative role, and cultural context rather than provide numerical measures. The study incorporates the formal analysis of visual aspects and art-historical approach to understand the construction and use of architectural elements in individual miniatures. Moreover, the comparative approach is applied to trace stylistic continuity and change in Mughal miniature painting at various stages of its development. In other words, methodology implies the consideration of individual miniature as an artistic composition and cultural document to make interpretation of architectural representation possible within the context of Mughal court culture and imperial patronage (Beach, 1978; Minissale, 2001; Welch, 1997).

Selection of Mughal Miniature Paintings

Purposive sampling was used as the method of choosing Mughal miniature paintings, putting the emphasis on miniatures that contain recognizable architectural structures and sufficient visual information to conduct the analysis of architectural and spatial aspects. Various types of architectural environment such as palaces, forts, gardens, pavilions, mosques, tombs,



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courtyards, and royal residences are represented in selected miniatures. Miniatures related to various phases of Mughal miniature painting, especially the times of Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan, were preferred for the purpose of chronological comparison and identification of changes in architectural representation. Preference was also given to miniatures portraying historical, courtly, ceremonial, military, religious, and literary scenes in which architecture serves the narrative or compositional function. Selection was based on the availability of reliable information concerning the title, approximate date, authorship, provenance, manuscript association, and current collection of miniature (Seyller, 1999; Beach, 1978).

Sources of Data

For the current research, two types of data sources have been used, which include primary visual sources and secondary scholarly sources. Primary data include images of high-quality Mughal miniature paintings, which are taken from museums, illustrated manuscripts, digital archives of institutions, art catalogues, and authenticated historical collections. The particular focus on paintings that belong to museum and institutional collections is based on the fact that these sources contain information about attribution, dating, provenance, context in a manuscript, and significance of the artwork. Secondary data sources include scholarly books, scholarly research articles, exhibition catalogues, architectural literature, and other works about Mughal paintings, Mughal architecture, Persianate visual culture, and Indian art history. Information retrieved from these sources helps define the historical and architectural context of chosen artworks and interpret their visual and cultural characteristics (Asher, 1992; Koch, 2014; Necipoğlu, 2019).

Visual and Architectural Analysis

Each chosen miniature was analyzed using a defined set of parameters related to visuals and architecture. First of all, a type of the main architectural construction was identified and individual architectural elements were analyzed, including domes, arches, columns, gateways, balconies, terraces, walls, screens, pavilions, courtyards, water channels, and decorative elements. Spatial organization was evaluated by analyzing the arrangement of foreground, middle ground, and background elements, the usage of elevated view point, overlapping of objects, vertical stratification, and multi-plane space. The scale of buildings and people, symmetry and geometric organization, colour schemes, decoration of surfaces, and architectural framing were analyzed. Finally, human figures' positions and activities within the built environment were evaluated in order to determine how the architecture defined the place, hierarchy, narrative context, and emphasis (Welch, 1963; Minissale, 2001; Ray, 2018).

Classification of Architectural Types

In order to interpret the images presented in the paintings systematically, the architectural elements found in the selected works of art were categorized in six main groups: palaces and royal residencies; forts and defensive structures; gardens and charbagh designs; pavilions and chhatris; mosques and religious structures; and tombs and funerary monuments. Palaces and



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royal residencies were analyzed within the context of courtly events, royal audiences, and imperial representations, while forts and defensive structures were analyzed in the context of military and political narratives. The gardens and charbagh designs were analyzed in terms of geometric composition, water features, vegetation, paths, and the connection with the tradition of Persianate and Timurid gardens. Pavilion and chhatris were analyzed as architectural framing devices and places related to courtly or recreation activities, while the mosques and other religious structures were analyzed in the context of religious and ceremonial practices. Tombs and funerary monuments were analyzed with specific regard to monumentality, symmetry, gardens, and commemoration (Asher, 1992; Koch, 1997; Koch, 2014).

Comparison

The comparative analytical method was used for examining the differences and continuities in architectural representation during the different stages of the development of Mughal miniature painting. The paintings from the Akbar period were compared with the paintings created during the reign of Jahangir and Shah Jahan to reveal changes in architectural details, organization of space, perspective, decoration, and the relationships between the buildings and figures. Moreover, the architectural elements depicted in the paintings were compared with the existing characteristics of Mughal architecture and the wider traditions of Persian, Central Asian, Timurid, and Indian architecture. In this way, the analysis helped to reveal the recurrent architectural forms and the transformations of the representation of palaces, gardens, forts, pavilions, religious structures, and funerary architecture (Asher, 1992; Beach, 1978; Necipoğlu, 2019).

Interpretation of Data

The visual data were interpreted using a thematic and contextual approach that involved grouping together architectural forms and compositions that had recurring themes associated with them such as imperial authority, social hierarchy, cultural identity, religious significance, spatial planning, and storytelling. Architectural structures were not interpreted based on their form alone but their placement, scale, relation to figures, decoration, and narrative were all considered collectively. Emphasis was placed on the way that architecture could convey political authority, royal prestige, religious significance, cultural refinement, and orderliness. The interpretation process also considered the difference between architectural representation that is a representation of a real-life Mughal structure and architectural representation that is a creation based on the miniature painting's requirements. These observations were then synthesized to see how architecture served the multiple functions of being an architectural form, composition technique, narrative setting, and cultural signifier in Mughal miniature paintings (Minissale, 2001; Koch, 2014; Rathore, 2025).



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Results and Discussion

Table 1. Distribution and Characteristics of Architectural Forms Represented in Mughal Miniature Paintings

Architectural category	Major features examined	Narrative context	Visual function	Cultural/significant association
Palaces and royal residences	Audience halls, courtyards, terraces, balconies, arches	Courtly and ceremonial	Establishes royal setting	Imperial authority and hierarchy
Forts and defensive structures	Walls, gateways, towers, battlements	Military and historical	Establishes territorial setting	Political power and control
Gardens/charbagh	Water channels, fountains, pathways, trees	Leisure and courtly activities	Creates ordered landscape	Paradise, refinement and controlled nature
Pavilions/chhatris	Domes, columns, canopies, arches	Courtly and recreational	Frames important figures	Status and architectural elegance
Mosques/religious buildings	Domes, arches, minarets, prayer spaces	Religious and ceremonial	Establishes sacred space	Religious identity
Tombs/funerary structures	Tomb chambers, domes, gardens, gateways	Commemorative	Creates monumental setting	Memory and dynastic identity

As Table 1 reveals, the various types of architecture depicted by Mughal miniatures included palace buildings, forts, gardens, pavilions, mosques, and tombs, all of which had different roles. They created the settings within the scene, as well as providing ideas about court protocol, power, religion, pleasure, sophistication, and memorializing. In general, architectural depiction was used as a way of communicating Mughal cultural values.

Table 2: Spatial and Compositional Characteristics of Architectural Representation

Spatial parameter	Characteristics observed	Visual function	Interpretive significance
Foreground	Architectural framing and figures	Establishes immediate space	Directs visual attention



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Middle ground	Main architectural/narrative activity	Organizes principal action	Establishes narrative focus
Background	Buildings, gardens and landscape	Creates spatial depth	Establishes environmental context
Vertical layering	Multiple architectural levels	Represents complex spaces	Expands visible architectural space
Horizontal organization	Courtyards, pathways and walls	Divides pictorial space	Establishes spatial relationships
Perspective	Elevated/multiple viewpoints	Shows several architectural surfaces	Creates pictorial depth
Scale	Variable building–figure proportions	Establishes hierarchy	Emphasizes important structures/figures
Symmetry	Balanced architectural arrangements	Creates visual order	Reflects Mughal aesthetic principles
Architectural framing	Arches, columns, windows, pavilions	Directs attention	Emphasizes important figures/events

As illustrated by Table 2 below, layering, perspective, size, symmetry, and architectural framing were used by Mughal artists in arranging space in miniature paintings. Such methods of arranging space helped to control the viewer's visual perception and to direct attention to important architectural elements and people. The overall conclusion is that space arrangement made architecture into a powerful visual device.

Table 3: Narrative and Symbolic Functions of Architecture in Mughal Miniature Painting

Architectural setting	Narrative function	Social/political function	Symbolic meaning
Palace	Courtly/royal events	Royal hierarchy	Imperial authority
Audience hall	Royal audience	Relationship between ruler and subjects	Kingship
Fort	Military events	Territorial control	Political power
Garden	Leisure and recreation	Elite courtly culture	Paradise and refinement
Pavilion	Ceremonial/private activity	Status and privilege	Luxury and elegance
Mosque	Religious activity	Religious identity	Sacredness
Tomb	Commemoration	Dynastic memory	Mortality and continuity



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Monumental gateway	Entry/procession	Control and authority	Imperial grandeur
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According to Table 3 below, the architectural context in miniature paintings by the Mughals had the dual role of being an element of narration as well as a means of conveying messages about social stratification, politics, religion, and culture. The various buildings such as palaces, forts, gardens, pavilions, mosques, tombs, and gateways had distinct meanings including kingship, territorial dominion, paradise, sanctity, and dynasty. In general, architecture served as a potent medium of expression for the Mughals.

Table 4: Comparative Architectural Characteristics Across Mughal Periods

Characteristic	Akbar Period	Jahangir Period	Shah Jahan Period	Later Mughal Period
Narrative emphasis	High	Moderate	Moderate	Variable
Architectural detail	Developing	Refined	Highly refined	Variable
Naturalistic representation	Developing	High	High	Variable
Spatial complexity	High	High	Highly organized	Variable
Symmetry	Moderate	Increasing	Very prominent	Variable
Monumentality	Developing	Moderate	Strong	Reduced/variable
Decorative elements	Elaborate	Refined	Highly elaborate	Variable
Courtly architecture	Prominent	Prominent	Highly prominent	Changing
Garden representation	Developing	Refined	Highly structured	Variable
Architectural framing	Prominent	Refined	Highly controlled	Variable

The architectural design from the Akbar period to the Shah Jahan period is progressively becoming more naturalistic, symmetrical, spatially organized, decorated and grand, as shown in Table 4. While the Akbar period focuses on narrativeness, the Jahangir period is more naturalistic and refined, and the Shah Jahan period is more organized, symmetrical and monumental architecturally. The Later Mughal period has varied designs in relation to changes in artistic focus and patronage, but still retains some features of the Mughal architectural visual language.

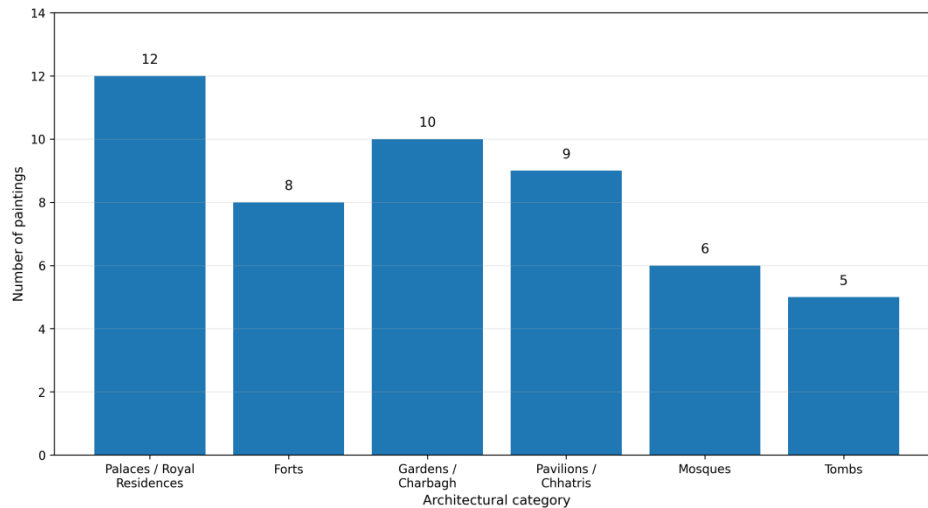


Figure 1: Frequency of Major Architectural Categories Represented in Mughal Miniature Paintings

As in Figure 1, palaces and residential buildings constituted the most common category of architectural representation, followed by garden/charbaghs and pavilions/chhatris. Forts, mosques, and tombs constituted the least common category of architectural representation, given their more specific functions as military, religious, and memorial sites. Generally speaking, this distribution demonstrates the significance of court and garden architecture in Mughal miniature painting.

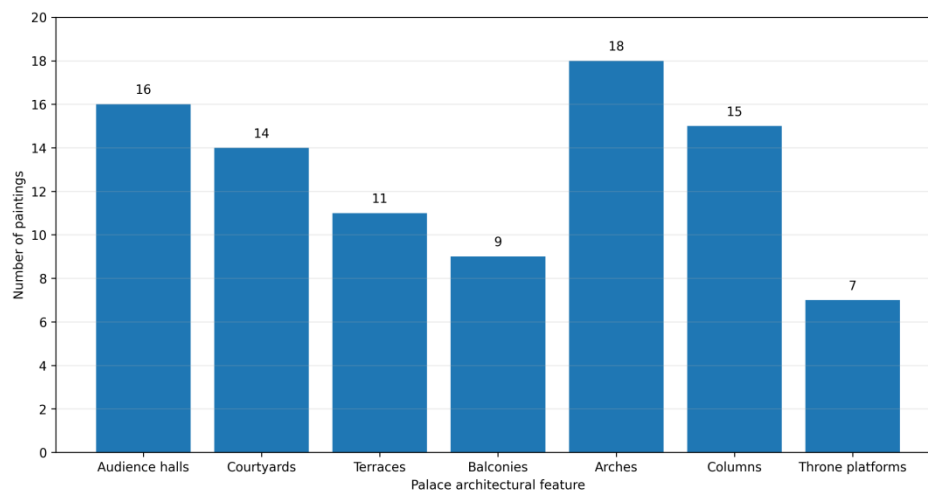


Figure 2: Distribution of Palace Architectural Features in Selected Mughal Miniatures
Arches, audience halls, and columns were some of the most common architectural features of the palace that were depicted in the selected Mughal miniatures as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

The other architectural features included the courtyards and terraces, which added much in depicting the royal architecture, while balconies and thrones appeared less often.

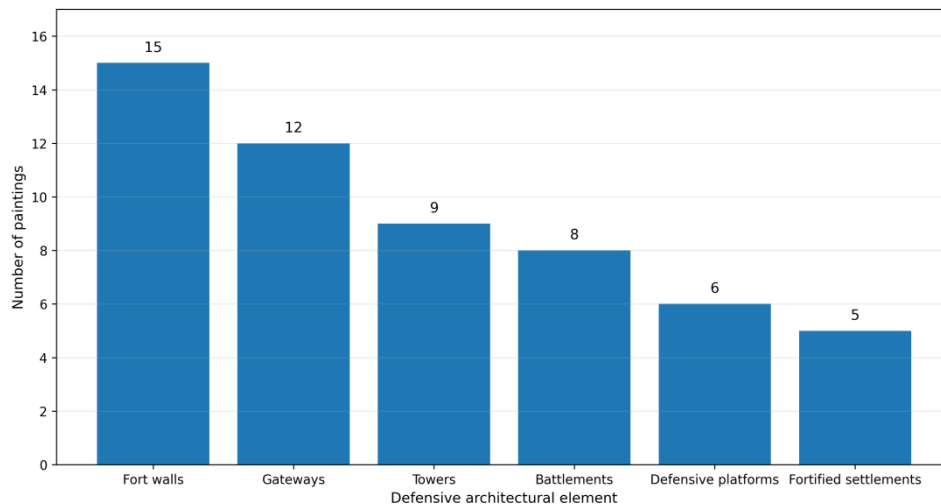


Figure 3: Frequency of Defensive Architectural Elements

It can be seen from Figure 3 that fort walls and gateways were the most prevalent defense-related structures depicted in the chosen miniatures of the Mughal Empire. Towers and battlements were present to some degree, but defense platforms and fortified settlements were not that common.

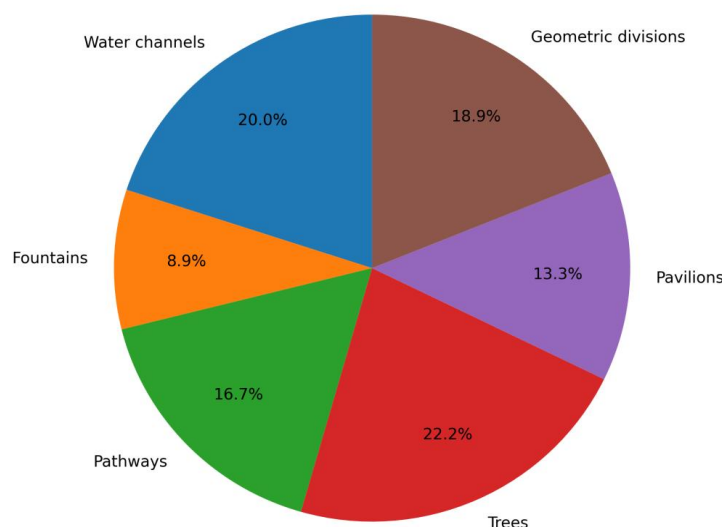


Figure 4: Representation of Garden and Charbagh Elements

According to Figure 4, trees, water courses, and geometric patterns constituted key elements of the depiction of Mughal gardens. Walkways and pavilions facilitated spatial design and recreation activities, whereas fountains were comparatively less common. In general, the garden elements represent the principles of Mughal culture including symmetry, control over nature, aesthetic values, and paradise.

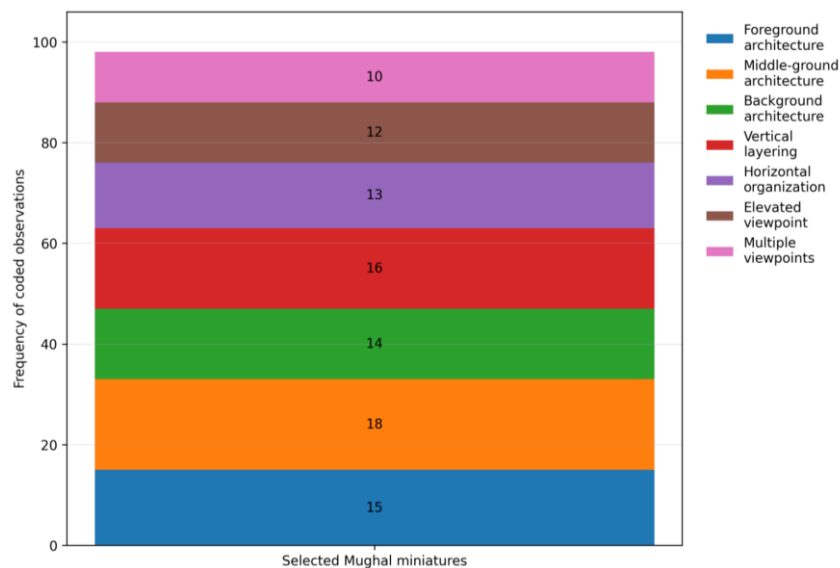


Figure 5: Spatial Composition of Architectural Elements

Figure 5 showed that mid-ground architecture and vertical stratification were common techniques used, and then came foreground and background architecture. Other techniques that helped in forming the pictorial space included horizontal organization and elevated views, along with multi-viewpoints, which added even more to the spatial structure. In conclusion, the use of these techniques made it possible for the artists to create depth in their work.

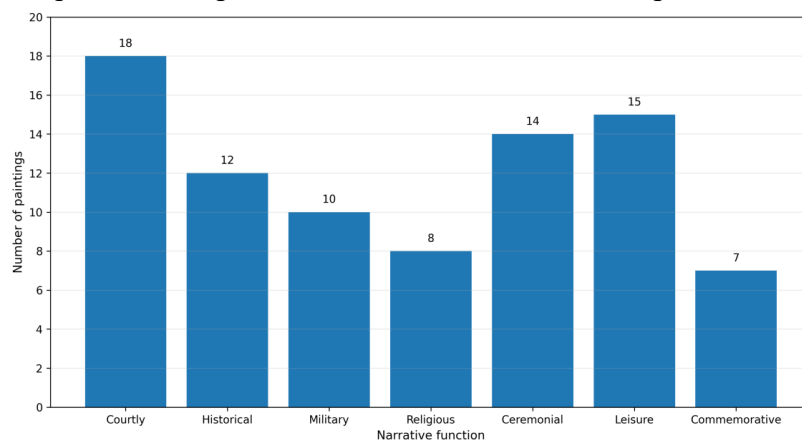


Figure 6: Narrative Functions Associated with Architectural Settings

As can be seen from Figure 6, the most common narrative contexts in terms of architectural settings were those of courtly and leisure, followed by those of ceremony and history. Military, religious, and commemorative contexts were relatively rare but added an element of politics, spirituality, and memory to Mughal miniature scenes. It is clear that architecture had an important role in creating the context of Mughal scenes.

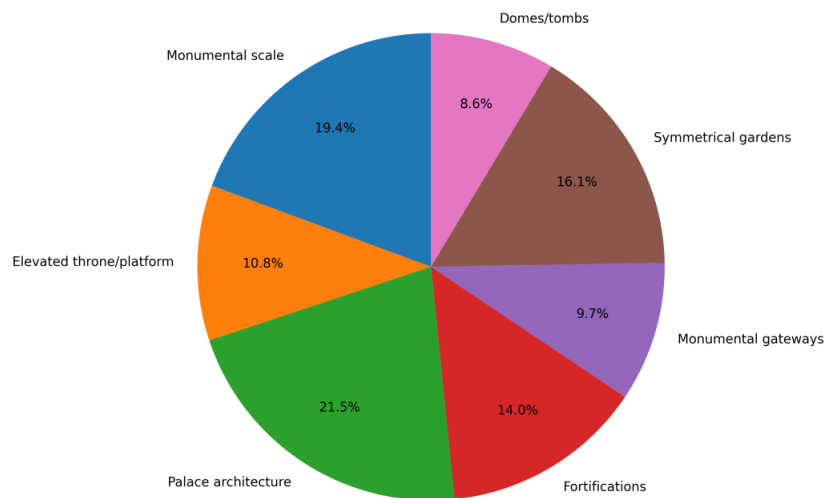


Figure 7: Architectural Indicators of Power and Status

As seen from Figure 7, palace architecture and monumental proportions were among the key visual representations of power in Mughal miniatures. Symmetric gardens, fortress walls, high thrones, gateways, and domes/tombs served to accentuate hierarchy, power, and the prestige of dynasty. All in all, architectural magnificence could be seen as a visual representation of imperial power and status.

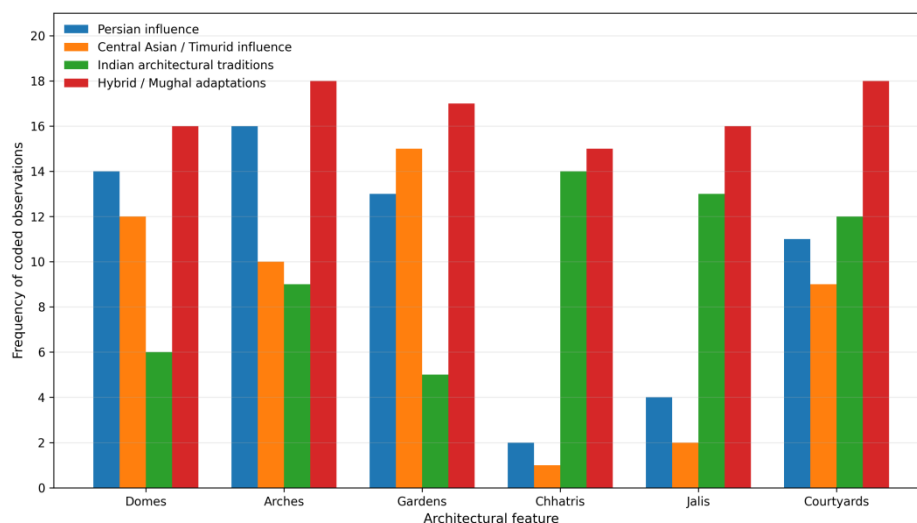


Figure 8: Persian, Central Asian and Indian Architectural Influences

Fig 8 is an illustration of how Persian, Central Asian/Timurid, and Indian architecture have been used together in the Mughal miniature painting style. It is evident that Mughal or hybrid designs are very common throughout the architectural details, suggesting that various elements of culture have been selectively integrated and transformed.

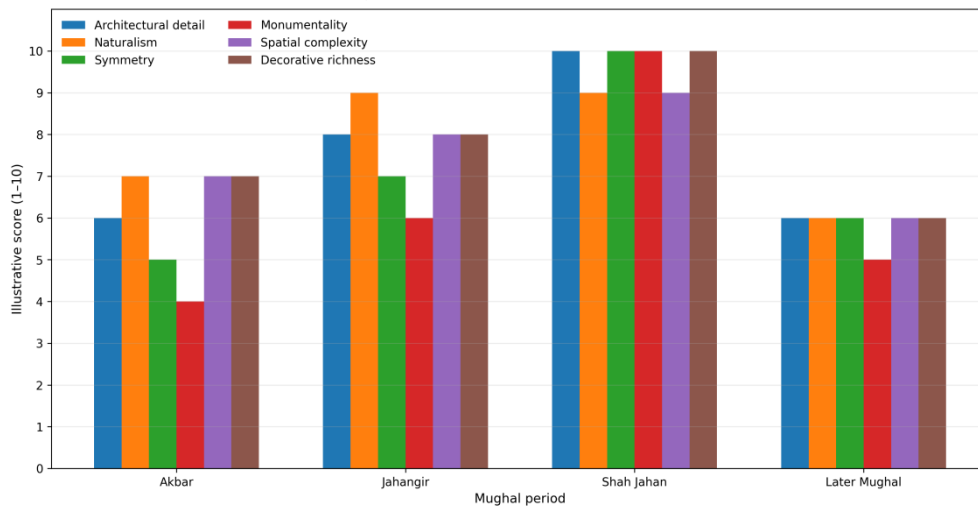


Figure 9: Comparative Representation of Architectural Characteristics Across Mughal Periods

According to Figure 9, there is an evident advancement in the depiction of architecture from the time of Akbar to the Shah Jahan period in terms of symmetry, monumentality, spatiality, and ornamental decorations. The Jahangir era depicts a higher level of naturalism and architectural detail, whereas the Later Mughal period exhibits more variations in the studied qualities.

Discussion

The data shows that architecture played an important role as an integral part of Mughal miniature paintings and did not only serve as decoration for paintings but was actively used in order to create specific atmosphere within paintings. Palaces and royal houses were the most frequently depicted types of architecture in the current study, followed by garden/charbagh and pavilions/chhatris, thus confirming the link between courtly life and architectural depictions in Mughal miniature painting. The presence of audience halls, arches, columns, courtyards, and terraces in the analyzed paintings also suggests that architecture was used to create a specific setting for depicting royal hierarchy. These results are consistent with the previous studies which state that Mughal painting is linked to imperial patronage and courtly representation, especially during the times of Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan (Beach, 1978; Welch, 1997). The current data is also consistent with Rathore's (2025) suggestion that architectural elements within Mughal miniatures are meaningful and influence the formation of the hierarchy within paintings. Thus, the prevalence of palaces within the analyzed samples can be considered as



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evidence of the strong connection between Mughal architectural heritage and the development of imperial identity.

Further analysis of the principles of spatial composition identified middle-ground architecture, vertical layering, organization into foreground/background, elevated points of view, and multiplicity of points of view as significant approaches to the creation of architectural space. These findings are corroborated by earlier studies of Indian and Persianate miniature painting which point out the fact that the artist often used multiple points of view, overlap of forms, elevated perspective, and layering of space rather than linear perspective typical of Western painting (Ray, 2018; Shahabadi, 2019). The current findings are particularly supportive of the interpretation that in order to represent architectural space, Mughal artists made it possible to observe several levels, surfaces, and zones of space simultaneously. According to Rathore (2025), vertical layering, repetition of forms, and architectural framing were among the most important elements of Mughal visual language. Painted buildings could therefore be interpreted as representations of a special way of thinking about space rather than mere reproductions of buildings.

Results relating to narrative and symbolic functions indicate strong links between the architectural context and courtly, ceremonial, leisure, historical, military, religious, and commemorative roles. Architectural design was an especially important indicator of imperial power and prestige, forts and gateways indicated territorial control, and gardens symbolized the concept of nature and order, leisure, refinement, and paradisaical imagery. This finding relates well to the conventional interpretation of Mughal paintings as a visual tradition formed under imperial patronage and shifts in courtly ideology (Minissale, 2001; Koch, 1997). The present findings can also be seen in connection with the argument that architecture and painting both emerged in a common cultural sphere where the concepts of spatial order, monumentality, gardens, and ceremonies were employed to construct images of sovereignty. It is especially relevant to point out the correlation between architecture and narrative since Mughal paintings often combined the architectural elements with human figures and actions in order to create the setting, hierarchy, and narrative context. Thus, the visual structure described in the present study conforms to earlier observation indicating that architectural space played an active role in Mughal storytelling rather than just being the background for it (Ray, 2018; Rathore, 2025). Finally, the comparative findings indicate a gradual evolution in architectural representation from Akbar, through Jahangir, into the period of Shah Jahan, where there is particularly a lot of symmetry, monumentality, architectural refinement, spatial design and rich decorations. In the period of Jahangir there is more emphasis on naturalism and refinement which is in line with scholarly accounts emphasizing the role of naturalism, portraiture, spatial depth, and details observed in the paintings of the era (Welch, 1997; Schmitz, 2004). The high degree of architectural refinement found in Shah Jahan period is also in line with the historical record of patronage of monumental architecture under the rule of Shah Jahan, while the Mughal painting



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of that time still employed advanced techniques of spatial representation and naturalism (Koch, 1997; IMPART, 2022). It should be stressed that the influence analysis indicates that the influence of Persian, Central Asian/Timurid, and Indian traditions was not an isolated one but a combination through Mughal adaptation. Prior research similarly indicated influence of Persian art in early Mughal painting but noted the subsequent incorporation of Indian artistic traditions and a unique synthesis (Schmitz, 2004). Therefore, the current findings confirm the cultural-hybrid nature of Mughal miniature paintings where architectural elements were selectively incorporated to emphasize imperial power, spatial design, narrative and evolving cultural identity of the court.

Conclusion

The current study provides compelling evidence to show that the architecture was an integral part of Mughal miniature paintings and it was much more than just decorative background in these paintings. It not only served the visual and narrative functions but also provided the social, political, and ideological aspects of Mughal empire to the viewers. In addition, architectural setting in the paintings helped convey the imperial power, social hierarchy, religious identity, cultural sophistication, and dynastic memories. The study on the spatial composition of Mughal miniature paintings also showed how vertical layering, multipoint perspective, symmetry, scale, architectural framing, and foreground/background relationships helped create complex visual environments. The architectural setting was also an important part of narrative as it helped define the courtly, military, religious, ceremonial, recreational, and commemorative spaces. Through the comparative study of Mughal periods, it was also found that there was an evolution in architectural depiction in the paintings where greater naturalism was observed in Jahangir period and symmetry, monumentality, spatial planning, and decoration were evident in Shah Jahan period. This study has also shown that Mughal architectural depiction developed through interactions of the Persian, Central Asian, Timurid, and Indian cultures to produce unique hybrid images.

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