



Fig.1.8 : Alexander receives Roshanaka, the daughter of Darius, *Sikandarnama*, f.32, Gaur, 1531-32
opaque watercolour and gold on paper, folio: 31 x 20 cm, British Library, Acc. No.13836

Mughal Wall Paintings : An Overview of Pre-existing Traditions

Asok K. Das

In the study of Mughal painting tradition attention is invariably focused on the illustrations in manuscripts or drawings and paintings mounted in albums. The painters, however, were not confined only to this kind of work, they were entrusted with various other tasks like decorating the walls of palaces and monuments, prepare designs for carpets and textiles, book covers, pen boxes, lacquer wares and other similar work. There are many references to wall paintings in public and private audience halls (Diwan-e Am and Diwan-e Khas) of Mughal emperors, gateways, in the grand mausoleums built by them to commemorate the departed ones, and in resting chambers inside their pleasure gardens. Sadly, very little of these have survived the ravages of time, decay, neglect and vandalism.

The tradition of wall painting goes back to the dawn of civilization. The wall, be that of cave shelters or hewn-out cave temples, that of constructed temples and secular edifices, provided ample space to the artist to illustrate a story or decorate with ornamental patterning. The Mughals came from the distant valley of Farghana in eastern Uzbekistan, not very far from the Silk Road, where for centuries previous to their rise local traditions merged with the rich traditions of China and India. Fresh impetus was provided by the Timur and his successors who made Samarkand their capital, one amongst the finest cities in the world. Babur passed through regions and cities belonging to different culture and artistic traditions, and absorbed many of their traits and conventions. When he finally arrived Hindustan and made it his new home, he encountered people, culture, religious practices and artistic traditions that were completely new to him. He was prudent enough to follow a policy of observation and absorption that ultimately gave birth to a new culture and artistic idiom, displaying much of the basic traits that he witnessed and experienced. His successors not only followed his open window policy but also enhanced the horizon of their vision by inviting more from other cultures, especially the Christian West.

The present study would briefly touch these postmarks. The Mughals had drawn ideas from Timurid figural paintings, Herati paintings and polychrome tile decorations, Turkoman chinoiserie wall ornamentation and Safavid figural paintings, polychrome tile decorations, and geometrical compositions. With this grand range of inspiration they created a tradition that reflect many of these traits remodelled after their own ideas. As Mughals were not the first to do this, there were others like Ghaznavids and their successors who migrated from the west in northern and central India, and the Bahmanids in the Deccan who followed a similar policy of absorption and creation. A brief observation on their artistic and architectural legacy would extend the proper perspective to the less-studied facets of Mughal wall painting.

WALL PAINTINGS IN TIMURID AND SAFAVID PALACES

Although no wall paintings survive in extant Timurid palaces, texts, manuscript and album paintings attest to the existence of a range of murals in the 15th century. The contemporary chronicler Ibn Arabshah described wall paintings in Timur's palaces in Samarkand as portraying the ruler in his many roles.¹ The description by Ibn Arabshah of the wall paintings ordered by Timur (r.1370-1405) for the palaces in his gardens at Samarkand reveals the existence of an extensive figural programme centered around the "Great Amir" himself : "representations of Timur ("now smiling, now austere") and his assemblies; his battles and sieges (including his victories in the Dasht-I Qipchaq, Iran and India); conversations with kings, amirs, lords, and sages; sultans offering homage and gifts; his hunting nets and ambushes; likenesses of his sons, grandsons, amirs, and soldiers; public feasts; cup bearers and musicians; his dalliances and representations of his concubines and royal wives."² Timurid and Turkman manuscript illustrations have depictions of murals, usually above the dado level in blue on white plaster with chinoiserie motifs or animals in landscape.³ In the late 15th century, the trend of wall painting declined, and it was replaced by polychrome tiles that often covered the whole surface of a wall. In late Timurid paintings from Herat, we notice white plaster areas of walls usually left unpainted while in Turkman paintings chinoiserie wall ornamentation is more common.⁴

Although the Safavids rose to power in 907/1501, evidence for wall painting dates to the mid-16th century, when the capital shifted to Qazvin and new palaces were constructed. According to the poet Abdi Beg Sirazi (921-88/1515-80), who described Shah Tahmasp I's (r.1524-76) new buildings in detail,⁵ the walls of the Dawlat-khana, or Government Palace, were decorated with animals and birds in landscape. The Chehel Sotun, a private royal pavilion, contained arched panels decorated with scenes from Persian literature, a hunt, a polo match, a feast, and beautiful women in a garden. In addition to commissioning the court artist Muzaffar-'Ali to paint the walls of both the Dawlat-khana and Chehel Sotun, Shah Tahmasp himself designed a mural of Yusuf (Joseph) and the Egyptian ladies. The polychrome paintings in the Chehel Sotun conform to the Qazvin style of lithe, long-necked figures.

A residential place in Na'in from around 973-83/1565-75 demonstrates the influence of the royal complex in Qazvin on its wall decoration. Here an *ayvan* contains eleven niches with painted scenes of hunts, feasts, and stories from literature. Unlike the Chehel Sotun, the pictorial elements are on whitewashed plaster with green and red details in relief. The background has been carved away, leaving light brown unpainted plaster and creating an overall impression of an intricate, bi-chrome composition.

WALL PAINTING TRADITION IN PRE-MUGHAL INDIA

Indian painting in the earlier epochs mostly constituted paintings executed on the walls of caves and structural temples, private chambers of palaces and dwelling houses. Assigned spaces in books written on palm leaves, tree bark, and silk and wooden panels were also embellished with paintings, mostly iconic in nature.

Wall Painting at the Sultanate Courts

Figural painting is hard to associate with the Delhi Sultanate but several examples of geometrical and floral decorations in monuments, specially, tombs and mosques, have survived, Figs.1.1, 1.2, 1.3. Simon Digby has examined the writings of authors contemporary to the rulers from Iltutmish to Firuz Shah



Fig.1.1 : Ornamental Medallion, Ceiling, Bada Gumbad Mosque
Lodi Garden, Delhi, 1494



Fig.1.2 : Ceiling Decoration, Bada Gumbad Mosque
Lodi Garden, Delhi, 1494



Fig.1.3 : Inside view of the dome of Qila-i-Kuhna Mosque
Purana Qila, Delhi, c.1540

Tughlaq that speak of wall paintings both figural and non-figural. The most important evidence of a continuous tradition of figural paintings on the walls of private apartments of the palaces of Delhi is furnished by Afif in the *Tarikh-i Ferozshahi*: “. . . the quantity of the customs which were established as government usage (?) and the customs appeared in conflict with the *Shar'*, he forbade them all; one of these (was) the drawing of animate forms in the private apartments of the Sultan; and (as for) that, it is the custom of kings that they always arrange picture galleries with figures in their place of rest. Sultan Ferozshah, out of his great fear of God, ordered that they should not make pictures of living forms in those galleries because it is in conflict with the *Shar'*; and in the place of depictions of figures they should draw a design with various kinds of *bostan* (orchard, garden, flowering trees) in accordance with the desire of friends for the spectacle.”⁶ The truth of Afif's testimony is further corroborated by the discovery of a hoard of seventy-two rare Yuan and Ming porcelain accidentally discovered in a dump while cleaning the backyard of a garden at Firuzshah Kotla in Delhi in 1961. No doubt these rare Chinese porcelain dishes, plates and bowls decorated with delicate Chinese motifs of flowers, leaves, birds, animals and aquatic creatures were destroyed and thrown out of the royal kitchen on Firuzshah's order during this time.⁷

Mandu

The Khalji sultans of Malwa had produced at least four fully illustrated manuscripts, three in a style close to the school of fifteenth-century Shiraz, and one in the Timurid style. They built imposing monuments in their capital, Mandu, but no trace of wall painting has so far been found. The only building, known as the House of Gada Shah, does have traces of paintings in the niches of a room, but they belong to the seventeenth century, probably from the time of Jahangir's stay there in 1617, Fig.1.4.

Out of the three Shiraz-style manuscripts, the best known is the *Ni'matnama*, the *Book of Delight*, started during the reign of Ghiyasud-din Khalji (died 1500) and completed at the court of his son and successor, Nasir ud-din Khalji (c.1505). Many of its fifty miniatures depict part of the domed structure and open pavilion where the enthroned Sultan supervises the preparation of dishes and drinks. These architectural backdrops show walls and alcoves decorated with geometrical and floral motifs.⁸ There is only one painting that shows the interior of the palace chamber where the wall is decorated with designs, Fig.1.5. These look more conventional than real. This is also true about two other manuscripts illustrated in the same style, *Miftah al-Fuzala*, completed by the scholar, Muhammad Ibn Da'ud Shadiyabadi around 1500,⁹ and '*Ajaib as-Sana'i*, a Persian translation of the Arabic compendium of Ibn ar-Razzaz al-Jazari, made by the same scholar Muhammad Ibn Da'ud Shadiyabadi, and completed in 1509.¹⁰ The former contains 187 small miniatures of various subjects and the latter 175 illustrations of automata or mechanical devices. These manuscripts remain to be published in full. The same is also true of the fourth manuscript prepared at the Mandu atelier, *Bustan e-Sa'di* containing forty-three highly finished miniatures in a developed Herati Provincial Timurid style. This was first published by Richard Ettinghausen in 1959.¹¹ The miniatures have not been published excepting the ones mentioned here. The published ones show murals with intricate floral decoration in blue and white and spandrels in black, Fig.1.6.¹² Needless to say, these are conventional and do not show any real setting. However, the painting on f.200verso is of special interest showing the 'ivory cult-image in Somnath', as it actually shows three large figural paintings amidst floral tracteries on the wall in the left.¹³



Fig.1.4 : Portrait of a woman, Gada Shah's residence, Mandu, early 17th century



Fig.1.5 : Interior of a royal chamber, Mandu, *Ni'matnama* f.124b, c.1504, opaque watercolour and gold on paper folio: 31 x 21.5 cm, British Library, Acc. No. Persian Ms.149

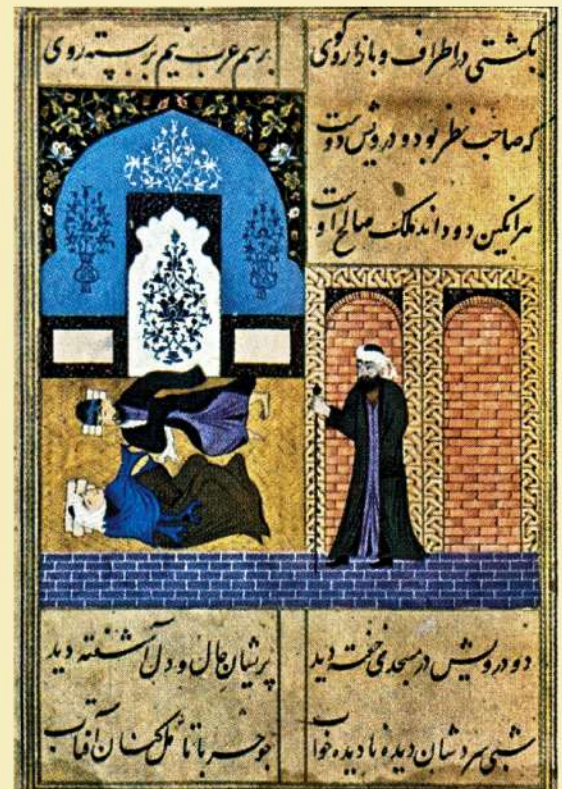


Fig.1.6 : King Salih discovers two dervishes sleeping in a mosque, *Bustan*, folio 133b, Mandu c.1500-03, opaque watercolour and gold on paper folio: 34 x 23.5 cm, National Museum, New Delhi Acc. No.48.6/4

Gaur

The Sultanate of Gaur in spite of its great architectural splendour and its rich polychrome tile decoration and intricate brickwork, most of which has weathered and damaged like those in Lattan Masjid built by Sultan Yusuf Khan in 1475, Fig.1.7, has not shown any sign of wall painting tradition. The appearance of a royal copy of the first part of Nizami Ganjvi's *Sikandarnama*, otherwise known as *Sharaf Nama*, has altered our perception about the existence of figural painting, albeit on paper. It is firmly dated in 1531-32 and inscribed to Sultan Nusrat Shah.¹⁴ The manuscript contains 9 miniatures of the style displaying an admixture of mid-fifteenth century Shiraz and Indian elements of unidentified origin. The painted decoration shown on the walls and eaves of buildings are conventional, with one exception in the scene of Alexander receiving Roshanaka, the daughter of Darius, where the red-coloured upright frame is decorated with chain-and-lamp motif in gold, a distinct local feature, Fig.1.8.¹⁵ The use of colour may be noticed in many surviving monuments of the region.

Gwalior

Prior to the arrival of the Mughals two Hindu dynasties dominated the political arena of northern and western India, the Tomar Rajputs of Gwalior and the Sisodiya Rajputs of Chitor. They had the wealth, power, and taste to commission elaborate architectural edifices, literary works and artistic creations. Raja Man Singh Tomar of Gwalior (r.1486-1507), Rana Kumbha (r.1433-1468) and Rana Sanga (r.1509-1527) of Chitor were great patrons of art, literature and music.

The immense fort-palace, Man Mandir, built by Raja Man Singh Tomar in Gwalior is an epitome of his innovative ideas and good taste. Not only the architecture of the palace is impressive, the decorative patterns are highly inventive and unique. There are *jali* works (tracery) and the figurative tile decoration in turquoise-blue, green and bright yellow on the massive Hathiya Pole gateway and on the entire stretch of the southern facade, never seen before in the country. The designs of caparisoned elephants, standing male attendants alternated with large spread-leafed plantain trees, tigers, Fig.1.9, and bands of decorative *hamsas* and two-headed *makara*-like creatures, along with geometric motifs, Fig.1.10, clearly point to the presence of artists of high merit involved in designing and execution.

Along with carved panels, tile decorations and *jali* work there were also paintings on the walls of the rooms and ceilings of the domes. Unfortunately, most of these have perished. Some traces remain inside one of the upper pavilions of the Hathiya Pole of the Man Mandir and these black and white decorations show an elaborate pattern of lotus rhizome and scrolling vegetal forms arranged in arabesques scrollwork. Dancing girls, female musicians and peacocks are noticed interwoven into the scroll work, Figs.1.11 & 1.12. Of particular interest is the fretted stone balcony in an interior room with cut-out silhouettes of dancers in the *ardhaparyanka* posture, Fig.1.13.¹⁶ When Major J.B. Keith made detailed investigation of the ruins of the palaces in the Gwalior fort complex in the 1880s and published his findings in *Preservation of National Monuments: Fortress Gwalior* (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1883), he found 'the turrets that crown the southern frontage of the palace has their interiors covered with frescoes'. He noted, 'men, peafowl, fish, are still to be recognized, and they appear to have been well-painted'. Keith also found scenes of Hindu pantheon, including a panel showing Rama and Sita, inside a building close to the Man Mandir and also in the canopies over the head of Adinath and other Jain Tirthankaras in the Urwahi area of the Fort. He also noticed several very

Fig.1.7 : Ornamental motifs, Lattan Masjid built by Sultan Yusuf Khan, Gaur, 1475 red clay with polychrome oxide glazes



Fig.1.9 : Frieze of elephants, palmette and fly-whisk bearers Man Mandir, south facade, Gwalior, c.1500 cut-tiles in green yellow and turquoise-blue



Fig.1.10 : Tiger, palm tree and a frieze of *hamsas* Man Mandir, Gwalior, c.1500 cut-tiles in turquoise-blue, green and yellow

beautiful and elaborate frescoes in a bathroom, hammam, in the Karan Mandir, having the side walls covered with 'all sorts of geometrical patterns.' He also recorded paintings in other parts of Karan Mandir, Jahangir Palace. Unfortunately, none of these survive now. The remnant of the painted decoration in the ceilings of the verandah enclosing Muhammad Ghaus's Tomb proves the authenticity of these observations, Fig.1.14.

Chitor

The situation of Chitor, as far as the tradition of wall painting is concerned, is even more disappointing due to ravages of war and other elements. Anand Krishna while examining the ruins in 1950s recorded the presence of extensive remains of wall painting in the upper chamber of a house, commonly known as Bhama Shah's Haveli: "the entire wall space of the topmost story including the domed ceiling is full of wall paintings which through neglect and ravages of time have suffered much and has been reduced to faint survivals. . . . The wall space is divided in about 30 rectangular panels of various sizes. . . . The theme of the paintings could not be ascertained, yet they belong either to some romance or to some historical narrative poem followed by long contemporary captions."¹⁷ Topsfield has published photographs taken in 1962 by Robert Skelton that reveal outlines of several pavilion scenes of Early Rajput type, Fig.1.15, and vegetation, including plantains. A frieze of running men, a saluki hound and a ruler in a *palki*, possibly pursuing a deer, Fig.1.16, seems to be a part of the depiction of some unidentified romance. The ceiling was covered by tendril-like rhizome decoration, as noticed in the Man Mandir, Gwalior, though cruder and much less sophisticated.¹⁸

Champaner

Champaner, the magnificent city built by Sultan Mahmud Begada, has some of the finest architectural edifices in the country, including the great Jami Masjid. Hermann Goetz noticed traces of floral painting on the wall of some monument here that have perished.¹⁹

Jaunpur

Jaunpur under its Sharqi rulers was a great center of art and culture with magnificent architectural creations. A fine *Kalpasutra* manuscript with numerous illustrations was produced here in 1465.²⁰ B N Goswamy published a *Shahnama* manuscript from the New York Public Library bearing a colophon dated 1501 and written at Parsa in Jaunpur.²¹ However, questions were raised regarding the authenticity of the manuscript and its illustrations by Barbara Schmitz.²² Some of the buildings added or remodelled by the Mughals after the fall of the Sharqis show the use of polychrome tiles, especially on the main gateway of the Shahi Fort, Fig.1.17. The Hammam probably built during Akbar's reign closely resembles the baths of Fatehpur Sikri. A tiny remain of painting on the wall of one of the underground rooms, Fig.1.18, and the presence of plaster with faded lines and designs in colour, would give a firm idea that once part of the Hammam complex had wall paintings.²³

Literary Evidence

In an interesting miniature in the *Chandayan (Laur-Chanda)* manuscript in the John Rylands Library, Manchester, one would notice the wall of the bed chamber of Chanda filled with images of gods and animals, and demoniac figures, Fig.1.19, seemingly, completing a scene from the *Ramayana*. The evidence of Sultanate period literature has been discussed earlier and the references in non-Persian literature have also been interpreted.



Fig.1.11



Fig.1.12

Fig.1.11 :A pair of peacocks amidst scroll-work
Man Mandir, Gwalior
c.1500, pigment on lime plaster

Fig.1.12 : Dancers playing cymbals and barrel-drum
painted decoration on the vault of a rooftop *chhatri*
Man Mandir, Gwalior
c.1500, pigment on lime plaster

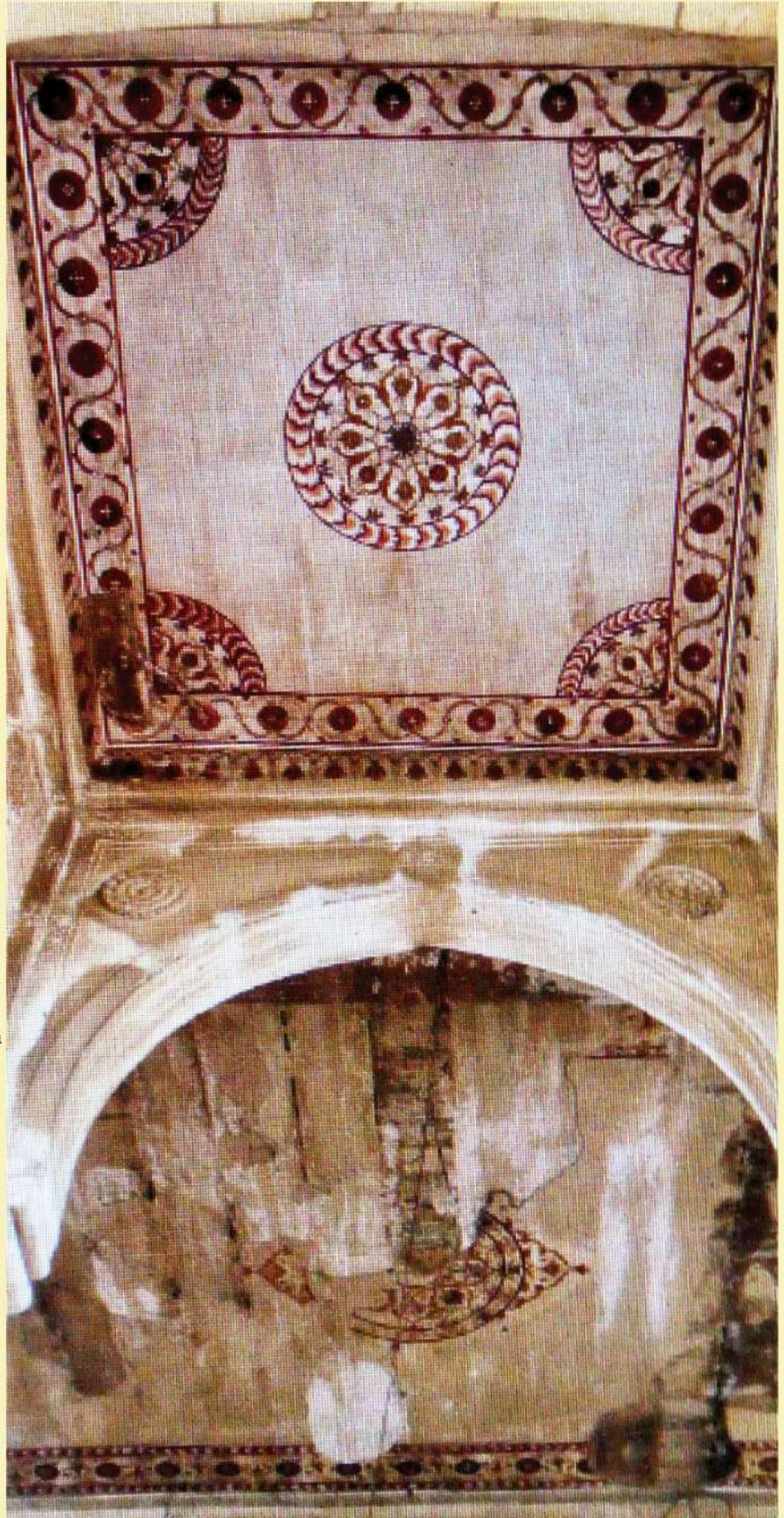


Fig.1.14 : Painted ceiling decoration
Tomb of Shaikh Muhammad Ghaus, Gwalior



Fig.1.13 : A frieze of dancers, Man Mandir, Gwalior, c.1500, tracery in sandstone



Fig.1.15 : Plantain trees, Bhama Shah's House, Chitor, c.1550, pigment on lime plaster



Fig.1.16 : Procession of running men, Bhama Shah's House, Chitor, c.1550, pigment on lime plaster



Fig.1.17 : Geometric ornamentation, Shahi Fort Gateway Jaunpur, c.1586, polychrome tiles



Fig.1.18 : Geometric pattern, Hammam, Shahi Fort, c.1586 pigment on lime plaster

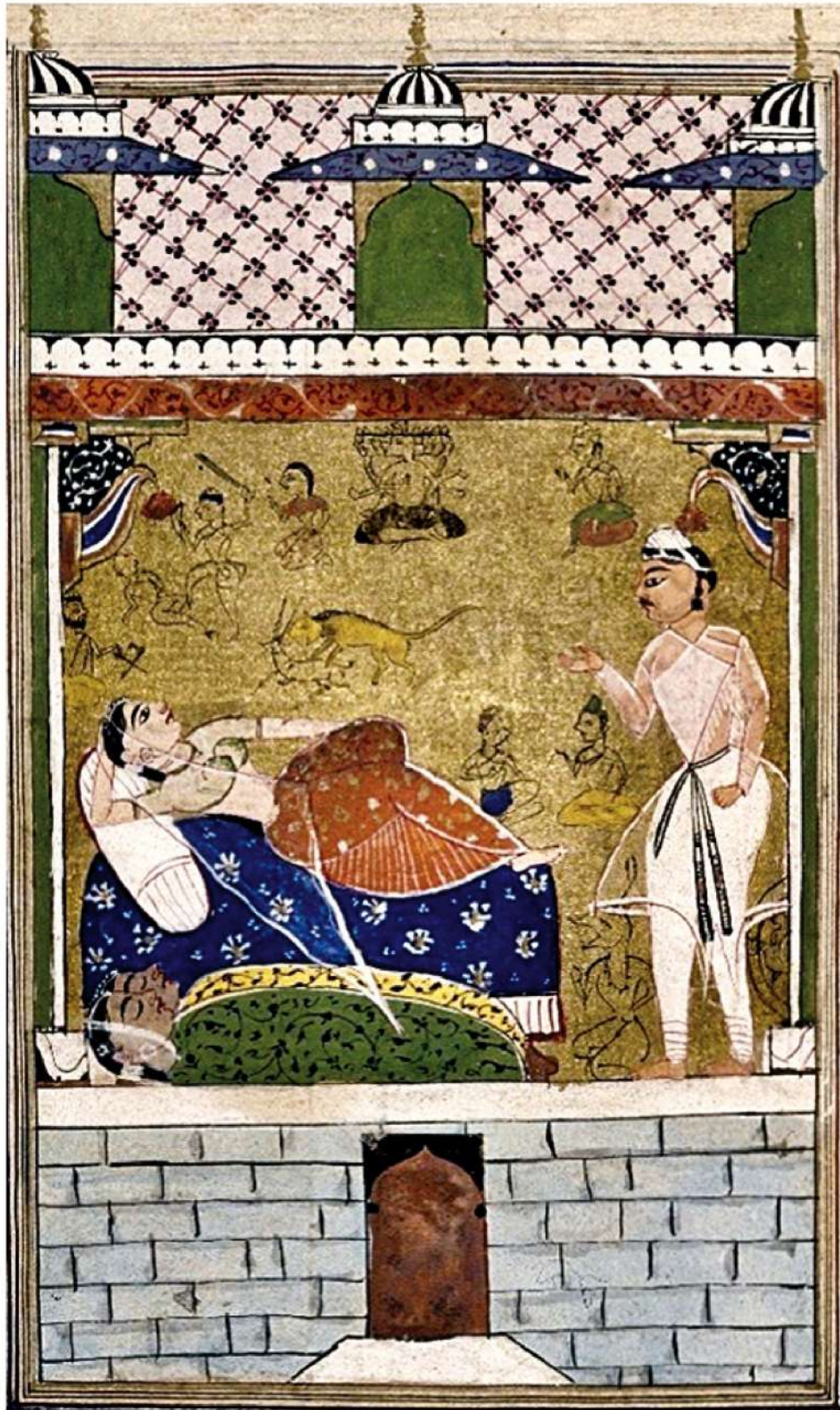


Fig.1.19 : Laurak in Chanda's bedchamber with wall paintings of the Ramayana episodes, *Laura Chanda* ms., Mandu, 1560 opaque watercolour and gold on paper, 23.4 x 14.7 cm, John Ryland Library, Manchester, Acc. No. Hindustani MS.1.160r

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