To the memory of Ameneh Azam Ali, Saleem Aslam and Antonio Minissale.
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Most of all, I thank Malcolm Sired for making everything possible, from those early days of encouragement on a rainy vacation in Corfu in 2001 when I picked up my pen, and where all this began. Thanks for believing that I have something to say and for pointing out the blue skies in-between the mountains of words.

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This book does not tell a story, at least not the kind of story of characters and events that has been told in art history many times. Instead, it tries to understand how visual language works using a number of paintings produced in India, and to a lesser extent, Iran between 1550-1750. For modern viewers paintings of this period often appear to have a distinct charm: they combine a sophisticated and stylistically precise execution with an apparent naïveté. Produced as illustrations for hand-made, gem-like books for ruling elites, given as gifts, and passed down through generations, they have always been valued and collected. A tradition of connoisseurship has for many years categorised and numbered these paintings, tending to extend a tradition of collecting. Connoisseurship has led to scholarship, often museum-based, which has had a lasting effect on much of the study of Indian and Persian painting. Dating from the early twentieth century this has been concerned primarily with documenting collections, explaining how and where books or detached folios were produced and discerning what they illustrate in order to give them titles and to some extent, an identity. This scholarship is inspired and driven by history as an academic discipline. It tends to explain these paintings by relating them to events described in court histories and other literatures as if they are visual documents of those historical events. In Euro-American art history a parallel might be to explain the work of Caravaggio, for example, purely in terms of identifying narrative events portrayed in his paintings, while ignoring the artistic structure, order and conventions used to visualise them.

In contrast to this kind of scholarship, the approach taken here is inspired by anthropology. The aim is to encounter and explore a culture, and to understand different ways of picturing things. Images of Thought isolates a number of formal principles found consistently in Indian and Persian paintings and tries to find out why they are there, and what they might have communicated to the viewer. These visual patterns form an important part of aesthetic response. They are configured coherently as part of an aesthetic order that is read, processed and enjoyed as surely as the stories these paintings illustrate. Art is thus more than a kind of documentary reportage; it is also a way of imaging thought.

From an apparently narrow research focus, the discussion of the nature of pictorial order can take on a broader significance for image makers and viewers, and those who like to read about them. The book should be a useful introduction for those wanting to become familiar with the refined manner in which these paintings, were received. It also should be of interest to students and scholars of critical theory, as it shows that one of the world’s richest painting traditions can
offering important insights into issues of visual perception and intellectual production generally.

While the approach of this book tries to take the best from this tradition of art history, which is discussed at the end of the chapter in more detail, it is supplemented by a wider reading from various disciplines. The view that Indian and Persian art is a form of *illustration* (of a story, history, author or a copy of nature) must be supplemented by the study of scholasticism. This reveals consistent ways of dealing with space, the human figure and in the mediation of "appropriate" and conventional idioms for representing mythical narratives and theological traditions. The attempt to understand how art is structured visually is subject to two stresses. One is to turn inwards to the painting itself, to analyse its forms from within the notional limits of the depiction, to identify the contents of the painting as elements that communicate a particular narrative. The second is outwards, to relate the contents of a picture to the wider social and intellectual context. Aby Warburg, who sought to find in Western art analogies between the art of painting and various texts "outside" the practice of this art, exemplifies this approach, which is flexible enough to utilise both inward and outward lines of investigation. This is undoubtedly fruitful for Indian and Persian paintings, especially given that a majority of them are pages in a book, bound into manuscripts with text pages.

In Euro-American art histories, the theory that linkages exist between images and the wider intellectual life of a society or period has sometimes developed into highly sophisticated projects such as Irwin Panofsky’s *Gothic Art and Scholasticism*, an attempt to locate art forms in scholasticism, the dominant philosophical and cognitive system of the Middle Ages. This is tantamount to reading theological and philosophical traditions into the message of the image. While objections to this kind of art history are well known, and have continually been voiced in Ernst H. Gombrich’s work, it remains an essential "statement of intention" for the art historian to leave no stone unturned in understanding a painting tradition, even if this means viewing miniatures in close relation to literary and philosophical texts. Visual perceptions are not detached somehow from wider cultural and aesthetic experience. This is certainly no less so for Indian and Persian art where it is possible to become familiar with religious, philosophical and aesthetic ideas in literature, which certainly no less so for Indian and Persian art where it is possible to become familiar with religious, philosophical and aesthetic ideas in literature, which may be used to work up a sketch of what Michael Baxandall has called a "cognitive style" of viewing and creating pictures.

Images of Thought is divided into four chapters, each analyses paintings based approaches that question our assumptions about representation and perception. Thus the study ranges outside of the subfield and engages with a wider art history. The aim is to question our dogmas about what we mean by subject matter and meaning in order to look at Indian and Persian painting in a book, bound into manuscripts with text pages.

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unconventional ways. Each chapter forms an introduction into the visual language of this painting. Chapter One: Reading Anti-illusionism questions the way Indian and Persian paintings have been understood as an art of illusion and seeks to focus on the dynamism of anti-illusionism, artistic techniques that do not try to be realistic in the Euro-American sense.

The concept of “the artist”, which has developed into a tradition in Indian and Persian art, history, ideology, is dissociated from the idea of ‘authorship’, in order to establish ‘authorship’, is questioned. How is one able to see the pictorial order of Indian art if one is continually breaking it down into idiosyncrasies of style, much of which is judged by standards of European realism? Using structuralist and post-structuralist criteria of anti-authorship, in the works of Derrida and others, this chapter attempts to clear the way for alternative perspectives on image analysis to emerge.

Another important question is related to the representation of the human figure. In Indian and Persian painting the human figure is visualized differently from the way it is in many European painting traditions before the advent of modern art. Chapter One explores why this is, offering explanations that allow us to move closer to the Indian conception of nature, the physical world, and representations of space. The chapter also examines how Indian and Persian painting transposes different kinds of intellectual and social practices into spatial categories.

Traditional art historical approaches to Indian painting are left further behind with new research presented in Chapter Two: Reading Pictorial Order. One way of trying to understand the thinking processes that are connected with image making and response is to look at how a mind might piece together various kinds of visual information to create meaning. This visual information consists not only of chromatic, geometric and compositional patterns but references to pre-established idioms. Formal analysis as an art historical method is concerned with unravelling the dynamism of pictorial order in Indian painting in different periods. A consistent pattern of pictorial organization emerges. Chapter Two suggests the survival and repetition of formal patterns and geometrical relationships that form an intelligent pictorial order shared by Indian painters and viewers over the centuries. There has been no systematic art historical analysis or typology of the formal principles of Indian and Persian painting, or any sustained analysis of the figural arrangements or chromatic structures that are also part of a book dedicated to general Islamic art. Chapter Two suggests the survival and repetition of formal patterns and geometrical relationships that form an intelligent pictorial order shared by Indian painters and viewers over the centuries. There has been no systematic art historical analysis or typology of the formal principles of Indian and Persian painting, or any sustained analysis of the figural arrangements or chromatic structures that are also part of a book dedicated to general Islamic art.

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esoteric view of formal characteristics in painting. There has been some analysis of compositional tendencies in the painting of the Shah Jahan period by Ebba Koch. Both these studies need to be put into perspective and developed more rigorously and this is the purpose of Chapter Two.

Not all of Indian painting is about the conscious manipulation of visual elements. The art historian’s task is to examine visual patterns and devices which may be, like grammar, acquired and used by the artist and viewer, almost as second nature. It is also an important task to distinguish where possible, both deliberate and subliminal aspects of meaning derived from this pictorial organization. One of the opportunities opened up by questioning the concept of artistic identity and authorship is to focus art historical analysis on pictorial content in other ways. Chapter Three: Reading Myth attempts to analyse the imagery of Indian painting by using the so-called deconstructive technique of reading. Instead of focusing exclusively on artistic intention, deconstruction assumes that each text, and by extension painting, contains layers of meaning which have grown up through cultural and historical processes. A writer or painter may not know it, but what he or she puts on paper has all kinds of other significance than the obvious and this “obviousness” can be “deconstructed” by the art historian and viewer, in order to reconstrukt less obvious meaning. This kind of content has as much right to be called subject matter as the ‘story’ or reality the painting is said to depict. Chapter Three is not only concerned to examine resilient visual patterns and themes but to offer tentative conclusions about how these repetitive visual configurations supply, moderate and suggest meaning.

All visual traditions, including those of Western cultures, contain traces of mythical thought, part of which functions on a subliminal level of production and reception. The study of myth in anthropology, literary studies and semiotics has demonstrated these recurring visual elements. Chapter Three identifies some of these in Indian painting and culture such as the imagery of the cave, the wise men, fire, water and representations of the book and the mirror, powerful visual markers which are represented in both texts and paintings and widely accessed across various Islamic cultures again and again. Indian art is not a fixed object with a simple story to tell. Multi-disciplinary studies of the potential semantic values attached to these images and parts of images, allow us to see a range of meanings available to the Indian or Iranian viewer, one which could be recombined in personal ways and they show us a discursive use of cosmology, superstition, intertextual traditions, aesthetics and power that mediate the work of art and make it a network of relations, which changes its status, meaning and allure in the overlapping of these various fields in the personal experience of the viewer.

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esoteric view of formal characteristics in painting. There has been some analysis of compositional tendencies in the painting of the Shah Jahan period by Ebba Koch. Both these studies need to be put into perspective and developed more rigorously and this is the purpose of Chapter Two.

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A crucial part of the intellectual profile of Indian and Persian painting is the complex relationship between image and text. The text not only mediates reading of the image, but the image is often an illustration of literary mythical structures, tropes and metaphors, which make this painting much more than just a reproduction of visual appearances. Chapter Four: Reading Reflexivity uses theories of reflexivity based on the writings of Foucault, amongst others, which help us to understand a rhetorical element in Indian painting similar to that used in literature. These paintings are shown as opportunities to discuss image making as part of the real world. These are by all accounts paintings that feature artists painting and people looking at paintings; they often show paintings ‘inside’ paintings. This is a reflexive process, as it is the images, subject matter alludes to image making. Indian artists painted the art of painting numerous times and it is entirely open to question whether this is a form of mimesis, or whether it distances itself substantially from this traditional and simplistic view of art in an attempt to paint an underlying fascination with the moral and cognitive phenomenon of vision and how it works.

The art history of Indian and Persian painting has for too long lagged behind important methodological breakthroughs in other art histories. These can direct the focus of scholars’ work to complex cognitive patterns that lie behind pictorial composition and viewing in any culture. I aim to bring the history of Indian and Persian art into the purview of this new critical analysis. The purpose is not merely to provide alternatives to traditional forms of art history but to uncover cross-cultural aspects of visual experience. The book analyses single paintings that are grouped by the kinds of pictorial order they display. It does not divide Indian painting into portraiture, the painting of flora and fauna, the illustration of poetic texts or history but looks at the laws of representation to which these “genres” adhere.9 It might be said that my approach makes differences in painting from the Akbar period to the Shah Jahan, but this is not the intention. The emphasis has been less to outline a chronological order and more to show underlying themes, such as the resilience of pictorial order, the recurrence of narrative structures and motifs, as well as the tendency in Indian art to reflect itself. These continuities and themes have been emphasized in order to add to the variety of ways in which Indian and Persian painting (and painting more generally) is viewed.

The assumption that Indian and Persian painting is a kind of documentary record ignores the aesthetic and poetic sensibilities revealed by pictorial order and idealism, and indeed, visual language. This is a problematic term, in the sense that the Islamic Indian and Persian visual arts and painting especially do not have a systematic visual symbolism that is offered by the literary historian. But, like poetry, it is a special language because it has a close relationship with aesthetic sensibilities. In Indian painting, as in art more

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generally, depicted objects, people, trees and animals signify to the viewer real objects in the world known to him or her. But they are also building blocks, like words, which are formed into semantic relationships with each other, within an intelligible structure of abstract design and order. The interplay of content and form can inspire feeling, intellectual stimulation and reflection; this interplay is also involved in the complex operation of cultural memory and alludes to an elaborate system of superstitious beliefs held by the image makers and viewers of this art. A combination of any or all of these responses undoubtedly had a part to play in the intellectual processing of images.

Pictorial order communicates aesthetic perceptions and meanings. Like language, pictorial order may be used consciously or unconsciously, or either intuited or intellectually perceived, depending on the ability or inclination of the viewer. And although, like language, pictorial order changes over time, it is possible to map its development. The pictorial order that structures Indian painting is a key to its character, and it is not a fixed substance. There is both continuity and change in Indian and Persian painting. Like language, pictorial order and meaning are part of a dynamic and interactive process; it is possible to trace them through particular examples while at the same time keeping an eye on the overall pattern of their trajectory.

Mughal India
It is important to set the right tone for the art historical analysis of Indian painting in this book, not by sketching psychological portraits of the emperors, as is often the case but by discussing some of the salient political, social and intellectual features of Mughal India.

The largest and most powerful empire to emerge in the Indian subcontinent in centuries, Mughal India of the sixteenth century was ruled from an itinerant court, which nevertheless had periods of relative stasis in Lahore, Agra and Fatehpur Sikri. No other single entity in the whole of India exerted a greater influence on India’s system of social stratification than the Mughal court. The court was essentially a nexus of ethnic, religious, economic, political, and artistic relations converging in the authority of the ruler, his family, his household and his servants. The relationship between the imperial court and its provincial outposts was continually renewed by the attendance at the imperial court of key members of powerful, local, dynastic nobles. The ebb and flow of ideas and contacts must have been staggering. The court also became the major institution for the distribution of rank. A system of patronage and reward was developed, often expressed in terms of military rank (zat) measured in thousands of horses, which was a kind of feudal arrangement whereby at least generally, depicted objects, people, trees and animals signify to the viewer real objects in the world known to him or her. But they are also building blocks, like words, which are formed into semantic relationships with each other, within an intelligible structure of abstract design and order. The interplay of content and form can inspire feeling, intellectual stimulation and reflection; this interplay is also involved in the complex operation of cultural memory and alludes to an elaborate system of superstitious beliefs held by the image makers and viewers of this art. A combination of any or all of these responses undoubtedly had a part to play in the intellectual processing of images.

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nominally, a noble was pledged to supply the equivalent of his rank in horses and men to the emperor as a service in times of war, in exchange for the privilege of his rank. The court also carefully controlled a network of marriages, and the harem at any one time was bound to reflect the affairs of state (and the affairs between states) possibly even more than the personal taste of the emperor. A whole system of intermarriages between Hindu and Muslim nobilities was gradually developed, not only to integrate the empire but also to emasculate potential power centres that might develop in the court; such intermarriages included the Mughal imperial family itself. Prince Salim heir to the throne and Mughal Emperor 1605-27 was born of a Hindu mother.

The Mughal court was the showcase for the finest cultural and intellectual products of the empire. The court was also a large employer. Wherever the court resided or travelled there followed large clusters of, merchants, artisans, architects, fountain builders, bookbinders, scribes, artists, librarians, court recorders, jewellers, tailors, furniture makers, musicians, cooks, guards, animal keepers, and personal attendants of both male and female nobility. In addition to these, there were various classes of advisors, ambassadors and professional intellectuals (theologians, physicians, astronomers and historians) surrounding the emperor, forming ever-smaller inner circles within circles. Layers of social classes enclosed the emperor, each with their own direct or indirect access to the centre. These levels of access to the emperor became a commodity with which power bases were built in a system of favours and patronage. Also typical of the courts of this period in the Islamic world and in Christendom was the merging of the ruler’s household with governmental bureaucracy, radiating from the centre. This fact was a powerful influence on the creation of formal and public space: palatial architecture of the courts of this period, reflected social and political relations, in particular, the themes of access to and protective enclosure of the emperor. In the Mughal context, public display and private enclosure were mediated by a series of formal spaces and palatial structures. The display area par excellence of the Mughal emperors was the jharoka, or royal balcony. The Mughals also attached great importance to the lay out of their tents and encampments revealing an intricate psycho-geography.

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Ritual activity and ceremony, which took place in clearly defined and recognised visual and spatial configurations of the court were also reflected in the geometrically calculated spatial configurations of the miniature paintings, with elaborate representations of spatial enclosure, numerous and complex gestures of fealty and allegiance, many grounded in historical and poetic traditions shared by generations of Islamic royal courts. These significant spatial patterns and the iconography of gesture, both used for the service of communicating courtly archetypes, reflected (and were re-directed into) ideal behaviour.

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The Mughals lived in a society of the spectacle organized by strict principles of visual order. Historical, literary, biographical and iconographic sources point to a highly structured and ordered conventions of Mughal painting.

Poetry and philosophy offered a canon of heroic and idealised behaviour such as courage in death, ideals of justice, mercy and power, and wisdom versus material wealth. These texts reflect how the elite wished to distinguish itself from other classes. The effortlessness of poetic turns of phrase and gesture recorded for posterity show a highly valued generational inculturation. Such literature also offered a system of symbolic stratification and etiquette. These aspects of ritual and ideal behaviour were visualised and fixed in Mughal painting with a language of spatial patterns and rhythms that also served to stimulate aesthetic appreciation, as well as enhance cultural memory.

As in many political and social structures, a complex diversity of power relations and networks make the simple radial model of absolute monarchy on which everything depends, inadequate. Several notable factors of court life show that the Mughul power structure was far more intricate. When the Emperor Akbar’s son, Prince Salim rebelled against him and set up a court of his own at Lahore early in the seventeenth century, this was only the outward expression of a long established feature of Mughal and Iranian royal courts, the tendency for heirs to the throne to usurp power and for there to be centres of influence at court which mediated absolute power. Some important ministers of state were more or less powerful than the emperor’s sons. A power struggle for example, from other classes. The effortlessness of poetic turns of phrase and gesture recorded for posterity show a highly valued generational inculturation. Such literature also offered a system of symbolic stratification and etiquette. These aspects of ritual and ideal behaviour were visualised and fixed in Mughal painting with a language of spatial patterns and rhythms that also served to stimulate aesthetic appreciation, as well as enhance cultural memory.

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The role that the harem played in matters of politics and taste can only be reconstructed with incidental references, but most indicate a hidden yet powerful influence on Mughal rule. There were various intrigues between male and female nobles, which illustrate that power emanated not only from the centre but also from other areas. Mughal women shared a close relation to women in Central Asian traditions (proudly upheld by the Mughals who viewed themselves as heirs to Chingiz Khan and Timur) and Buddhist theologians met to debate profound issues of faith and doctrine. Amongst them were the newly arrived Jesuits, determined to use this opportunity to convert the Emperor to Christianity and bring the Mughal Empire into the orbit of Christendom. This was one of history’s most significant transcultural encounters, destined to impact on the cultural identity of the Mughal dynasty and inscribed in the imagery of Mughal painting. 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in the Emperor Akbar's reign and several copies given to Mughal courtiers to help them gain an appreciation for, or at least a tolerance of their Hindu compatriots. These works show a remarkable willingness to depict the sacred iconography of other cultures, an attitude perhaps fostered by Akbar's desire to see more tolerance between the many different cultural and religious traditions found in his empire and the fact that many wives in the harem reflected these diverse backgrounds. Because the cultural diversity of the Mughal harem was broad, this undoubtedly extended the hybridity of ideologies that distinguished Mughal intellectual life and art. Culturally, the Mughal court was quite heterogeneous. From the Persian perspective, the Mughal dynasty evolved into a curious synthesis resulting from their Islamic monumentality and the court had brought numerous Persian ways to India. Established in India centuries earlier, other Islamic dynasties had adopted Persian cultural forms, which were manifest in court etiquette and in such arts as book illustration and poetry. Yet it was not until the advent of the Mughal dynasty that the Persian language and Persian culture more generally were established as essential components of an imperial style of government throughout the whole of north and much of central India. The first generations of Mughals in India under Babur (1483-1530), and Humayan (1508-56), were Turkic from Central Asia who spoke Turkic or Chaghatai with Persian as a second language. Even Akbar (1556-1605) spoke Turkish and this was understood by Jahangir also (regnal dates 1605-27). At the zenith of the Mughal Empire in the reign of Akbar this very important Mongol-Timurid heritage was filtered through Persian culture for which they had a remarkable veneration. The Mughals adopted Persian as the language of government and for their written histories and correspondence. It is not surprising that the Mughals treasured Persian literature and avidly collected Persian manuscripts. Every aspect of the Mughal arts of the book: margin designs, calligraphy, binding, lacquer work for book covers, illumination and illustration were developed from Persian examples. We know that the Emperor Akbar had a library, estimated at 24,000 volumes at the time of his death in 1605. Abu’l Fazl writes: His Majesty’s library is divided into several parts: some of the books are kept within, and some without the Harem. Each part of the Library is subdivided according to the value of the books and the estimation in which the sciences are

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held of which the books treat. Prose books, poetical works, Hindi, Persian, Greek, Kashiimren, Arabic, are all separately placed. In this order they are also inspected...Among books of renown there are few that are not read in His Majesty’s assembly hall; and there are no historical facts of the past ages, or curiosities of science, or interesting points of philosophy, with which His Majesty, a leader of impartial sages, is unacquainted...

A large number of these works were undoubtedly illustrated Persian manuscripts from which a taste for the Persian tradition of painting episodes was nurtured and sustained. Persian manuscripts were also present in the Mughal library in the form of certain refurnished manuscripts. The Mughals collected Persian manuscripts and added their own illustrations to them. Persian artists brought intermediary sketches or album folios to India.22

A large majority of the artists of Akbar's studio were Hindu and from all over the subcontinent, many engaged with the intricacies of Persian design through direct contact with Persian craftsmen. Humayun managed to attract Persian artists Mir Musavvir, Sayyid 'Ali, Dust Muhammad and 'Abd al-Samad from the court of Shah Tahmasp at Tabriz. Illuminators, and certainly a bookbinder, Mulla Fakhr, and assistants also made the trip with sketches and portfolios of work. They in turn, must have exchanged skills with illuminators and margin designers in Mughal India.

The dominant view of the Mughal mentality is that it was consistent with the early modern worldview, with an interest in rational observation, accurate historical recording,27 political image manipulation, and the Mughal emperors were usually placed at the centre of these intellectual traditions. An examination of the various histories of each reign from the Akbar to the Shah Jahan periods shows that integrated with Islamic religious traditions, which characterise court ritual, day-to-day actions and attitudes, were a belief in the evil eye, in talismanic and apotropaic symbols, and a great deal of time was spent on rituals to do with auspicious objects and astrological symbols. The literature of the period is imbued with Neo-Platonic thought and there are several examples of the encounter of rational philosophical strains with mystical traditions.28

These intellectual traditions are traced in more detail when we come to examine the imagery of Mughal painting.

The all-encompassing power of the Mughal court did not necessarily mean a centralized philosophy, or one approved or official way of reading texts, the world or religion. The model of a centralizing power is even less relevant as a way of conceptualising the Mughal intellectual terrain where there was a co-existence of a great number of so called mentalities, beliefs, narrative structures and views of the world. The network of relations and forms of communication in which this plethora of views and mentalities placed the individual was extensive and intricate, layered and nuanced. A different model or “image of

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thought" is needed which takes into consideration these complex relations. More useful in this regard is the philosopher Deleuze’s model of the rhizome, an underground root system, which connects one multiplicity to another. The advantage of using this model for understanding the intellectual life of the Mughal court is that we can avoid forming a hierarchical view of one dominant ideology from which subservient concepts appear to emanate, or on which they depend, nor do we need rigidly to isolate areas of intellectual experience, which in fact are related to each other in a fluid system. It is possible, perhaps even necessary, to form an overall image of a multiplicity of intellectual relations among which are situated artistic and aesthetic practices and reflections. This avoids placing too much emphasis on any one form of ideology (a particular intellectual tradition, for example) in determining the evolution or character of Mughal art. Another significant advantage of this contextualisation is that Mughal painting is situated in the context of intellectual traditions, the kind of elevated company it deserves. 

Importantly for explaining the exposition of this book, the rhizome model not only describes the object of study, that is, Mughal art as part of a multiplicity of intellectual relations but also the way in which it can be studied, with a variety of art historical approaches, rather than using any one particular method. Roland Barthes characterized this multiplicity of approaches in this way:

The variation in readings [of an image] is not...anarchic; it depends on the different kinds of knowledge—practical, national, cultural, aesthetic—involved in the image and these can be brought into a typology. It is as though the image presented itself to the reading of several different people who can perfectly well co-exist in a single individual.

A propensity for anthologies in literature and illustrated albums that appear to be composed of no obvious beginning, middle or end show us traditions of hybridx in Persian and Indian intellectual life. The anthologizing mentality encouraged an early form of scientific rationalism to live alongside magical superstition, and one person could entertain a wide variety of ideas that in the modern mind might seem contradictory, or indeed intolerable.

Authenticity, historicity and “fact” are mediated and understood in a variety of contexts in Indian literature and art. The anthologizing mentality may also be seen in Akbar's religious syncretism, which embraced narrative traditions. This is also evident in the training and education required for a highly valued adab culture (adab are aspects of etiquette, good manners and behaviour and the adab, one who has acquired these). This culture and personal refinement is based on a curriculum of learning composed of the widest possible number of subjects from poetry to science, which were essential to a noble of the Mughal court.

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Such prerequisites for the education of the adib, or gentleman scholar, presuppose an anthropologizing mind. Abu’l Fazl, the Mughal court historian is exemplary in this regard, treating an enormous range of subjects with his ordering of the Mughal universe in his ‘Aini A’lbari (‘Akbar’s Rules and Regulations’). The heterogeneous character of Mughal ideologies and beliefs has a strong bearing on the multiplicity of interpretations available for textual and visual narratives. These wide-ranging interests helped to form an intellectual consciousness that was also active in the processes of the production and reception of paintings. Simple identification of an illustration’s subject matter is only part of the story an image depicts, as surely as simple identification of a story is only part of the story. The idea that the Mughals viewed an illustration in isolation and with a mind that resembled a tabula rasa oversimplifies the viewing process. The following chapters explore how the Mughal viewer of paintings identified and understood the visual language and subject matter of a Mughal painting, based on the premise that his or her experience of multiple narrative forms and meanings of poetical and theoretical texts and a knowledge of painting traditions would not, and indeed could not suddenly be abandoned in the viewing process. Chapter One is concerned to open out the range of interpretations available to the Mughal viewer and in stark contrast to an art history that restricts this range.

The Art History of Mughal Painting

The following section is a brief survey of the art history of Mughal painting and is intended for specialists and those interested in issues of historiography and methodology. While it is worth spending some time becoming familiar with the way in which the art history of Mughal painting has evolved in order to gain a perspective on why it is so important to take the different approach adopted in this book, it may be omitted by those who wish to proceed to the visual analysis of Mughal art in Chapter One.

Some of the earliest attempts to write about Mughal art recognised that it was not solely an imitative art. For Ernest B. Havell, one of the earliest, systematic scholars of Indian art, the Mughal artist possessed the “manner of the modern Cubist, only without self-consciousness and aggressiveness,” and his “visionary imagination” was not solely an imitative art. For Ernest B. Havell, one of the earliest, systematic scholars of Indian art, the Mughal artist possessed the “manner of the modern Cubist, only without self-consciousness and aggressiveness,” and his “visionary imagination” was not solely an imitative art.

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this rarefied air and was classified as an elitist art external to the soul of Indian culture.32 More recently, a comprehensive survey of Western misunderstandings and prejudices in regard to Indian art have been analysed by Partha Mitter, which has sensitised us to a tradition of seeing Indian art from the judgemental perspective of illusionist technical achievements.33 However, Mitter’s work unfortunately tends to ignore much of Islamic art in India.

While some works on Mughal art are concerned to show the origins of the Mughal painting style as a synthesis of earlier Indian,34 or Persian painting most studies by European and American art historians have continually remarked upon the indebtedness of Mughal painting to the illusionist devices of European painting and linked this to a new appreciation of nature as real.35 These approaches are all in their own way indicative of a desire to classify and essentialise Indian art and they reflected European values and traits quite clearly. In this sense, the identification of naturalism in every curve of the figure and in every blade of grass was in fact a form of what Edward Said was to call Orientalism, a way “to codify, to subdue the infinite variety of the Orient”.36 It represented Indian and Persian art as simplistic and intellectually void, interesting only for their factual, accurate, often naive but nevertheless pretty depictions of nature and court life. In so doing, the objectification of Mughal Indian culture by European art historians is premised on the belief that the Mughals objectified their nature and their own culture in their paintings. Thus Mughal art has been subject to a series of simplifications, one of the most recent studies have even gone so far as to make the case that Mughal art’s naturalist tendencies are morally superior and that a return to non-naturalistic painting (in the Jahangir period, 1605-1627, for example) was a sign of moral ‘decadence’ a value judgement which screens a simple disapproval of Mughal Indian taste.37 These approaches are all in their own way indicative of a desire to classify and essentialise Indian art and they reflected European values and traits quite clearly. 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ubiquitous of which regards Mughal paintings as caricatures, dispassionate creations that are simulacra of the visible world, rather than images of thought.

At some point, rather limited attempts by Mughal artists to use certain illusionist painting techniques became confused with a "will to naturalism" in the minds of historians of Mughal art. The Mughals’ interest in animals, trees and flowers has been traced to the writing of first Mughal Emperor Babur (regnal dates 1526-30) in the so-called Babur-nama, the memoirs of Babur, which contains much description of visual experiences and observations. This has often been misread as a rational interest in natural science. It is often forgotten that Babur used examples from nature to express poetic and sometimes religious or poetic sentiments, and this continued for a century in the reign of Jahangir (1605-27). The misinterpretation of the Mughal regard for nature helps to prepare the viewer of Mughal paintings to accept that the Mughals were somehow waiting for the illusionist techniques of European art to come along so as to be more able to feed their objective, scientific interest in the world around them.

At its core, Mughal painting remains conventional, hieratic and more strongly related to Persian art than to European, despite numerous anecdotal studies that have served to repress or simply ignore this characteristic. This tendency remains in the otherwise superb analysis of the Padshah-nama (a history of the Emperor Shah Jahan regnal dates 1628-57) by Milo Cleveland Beach and Ebbi Koch, where an underlying assumption is that the history of Mughal painting is a march towards psychological realism and the more effective recording of historical events, with increased technical developments in depicting volume and mass. These observations on Mughal art ignore the very evident and semantically significant idealising elements in Mughal painting where aesthetic considerations about composition, format and traditional schemata are emphatic, at least as much as historically accurate details. The authors often emphasize the historical accuracy of appearances in Mughal painting and underplay Mughal art as a reflection of a dominant aesthetic system presented in a field of idealising tendencies. In the same work, painting under the Emperor Akbar, 1556-1605 is described in terms of inadequacy and decline compared to the naturalist painting of the previous reign, and also with the reservation that: “There is also less interest in evoking the volumes, textures, or physical richness of the material world.” Yet although Shah Jahan painting has this same detail, there is primarily a design aesthetic which organises it. As in all Mughal art, painting keeps the graphic line around faces, insists on flattening forms with textile patterns and applies modelling selectively. In addition to this, there is the continuation from Persian painting of previous centuries of organising space in geometrical terms, especially in the court scenes. Lines, colours, forms are ubiquitous of which regards Mughal paintings as caricatures, dispassionate creations that are simulacra of the visible world, rather than images of thought.

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bound into an abstract aesthetic that may be clearly conceived of separately from that which they depict. These pictorial elements point to a deliberately anti-illusionist aesthetic, which has not been given its proper emphasis. The insistence on privileging naturalism ("realistic" portraiture and "proper" perspective) is at the expense of viewing abstract design and aesthetic content. This is especially true of so-called natural history painting that is always judged by how successfully it accurately portrays the details of an animal’s anatomy, for example, rather than purely aesthetic qualities of line, rhythm, sense of balance and overall design attributes. Most importantly, this literal approach ignores how such images are located in complex semantic networks.

The highly refined ordering attitude to nature is naturally manifest in the Mughal painting of flora and fauna, and is reflected in the Emperor Jahangir’s obsessive measuring of natural objects, not for some scientific reason but because it flatters the sense of finding and recognizing hidden aesthetic proportions in nature. Jahangir continually credited himself with this power of perception. If the Mughals were so deeply enamoured with nature, they would have loved it for its lack of order, nothing in the sources suggests they did.

While it is true that Mughal art did adopt various European artistic techniques for visualizing reality, a transfer that is often viewed as defective art history has been primarily concerned in tracing what is reflective of European culture rather than reading the visual language of Mughal art beyond these traces. The Mughals’ reluctance to surrender many of their painting techniques and devices, which differ greatly from traditional or systematic illusionism (stereoscopic perspective, chiaroscuro, contrapposto and the illusion of texture, for example) appears more strongly in relief when we compare Mughal painting to later Indian painting of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this period European illusionism reflected a new cultural hegemony in an evolving system of power that renegotiated Indian-European differences. It is only when we make comparisons of this kind that we realise exactly how much Mughal painting of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries featured a great deal of anti-illusionist and idealist content—a form of cultural enunciation that has remained invisible to most contemporary art historians. Naturalism and illusionism are relative, not absolute terms. Certainly, compared to the Persians, or the Egyptians for that matter, the Mughals were more “naturalistic” in their painting, but how interesting that their highly refined spatial and geometrical conventions should be judged on numerous anti-illusionist artistic devices and techniques survived until the British took over as patrons of art. Illusionism in art is not a neutral field of artistic technical performance but a cultural space where ideological negotiations take place under the remote control of power relations. This is true not only in the Mughal period of cultural and political
activity but also in the writing of contemporary art history. Chapter One addresses many of these issues.

The art history of Mughal painting has also been concerned to show how Mughal paintings fit in with the arts of the book. These studies often skilfully use techniques associated with palaeography to piece together dispersed manuscripts, or to establish the date and provenance of extant manuscripts or other factual details about them, or they try to identify the works of artists on stylistic grounds. This characterizes the work of Ellen Smart and John Seyller. The latter has catalogued meticulously various copies of the **Hamza-nama** (literally, quintet of poems) of Amir Khusrau Dihlavi (1253-1325), or single paintings of the **Hamza-nama**, a book of magical tales of the prophet’s uncle. The former has also contributed much to our understanding of the importance of inscriptions in Mughal manuscripts. Various other studies focus on single manuscripts. Many studies of illustrated manuscripts help us to gain some sense of the continuity of iconographical cycles but one criticism of this kind of approach is that it tends not to deal with formal principles of painting, fixed on the minutiae of technical aspects and style.

It is not only the form and structure of visual language that has been a neglected area of study in the history of Mughal art, but also the analysis of visual topoi, recurrent themes and their intertextual meanings. There are some exceptions, however. One of the most penetrating analyses of a single painting in Mughal art remains Richard Ettinghausen’s analysis of the well-known miniature of **Jahangir Preferring the Company of Shaykhs**, where textual analysis and comparative method build up a picture of a complex intellectual message, not merely one of illustration. Another example of this kind is a short study of the imagery of light and dark in Mughal paintings provided by Robert Skelton, which assumes that they articulate recurrent archetypes that speak to the viewer with a complex visual language. This approach is taken further in Chapter Three of this book. Despite repeating some of the truisms about Mughal dependence on European art, the earlier work of Ebba Koch, especially her treatment of the symbolism involved in European influenced representations and some showed that Mughal painting is far more complex in its use of imagery than has been assumed by many historians of Mughal art.

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Other Indian Paintings: from the Chester Beatty Library (London: Scorpion, 1995) and Catalogue of Indian Miniatures in the Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, Ohio: Cleveland Museum of Art in cooperation with Bloomingon, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1986), all of which are very informative, descriptive and well researched. The standard work in this genre is also for the Freer Gallery, Milo Cleveland Beach, The Imperial Image: Paintings for the Mughal Court (Washington D.C.: Freer Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1981).

This is also the case with writing that accompanies or contextualizes exhibitions. For example, Stuart Cary Welch, India Art and Culture, 1300-1900 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985).
