

Profiled Figures: The Modes of Representation of Faces in South Asian Painting

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Introduction

This paper argues that South Asian people's physical features such as eye and nose prompted Hindu painters to render figures in profile in the late medieval and early modern periods. In addition, I would like to explore the conceptual and theological meanings of each mode i.e. the three quarter face, the profile view, and the frontal view from both Islamic and Hindu perspectives in order to find out the reasons why Mughal painters adopted the profile as their artistic standard during the reign of Jahangīr (1605–27).

Various facial modes characterized South Asian paintings at each period. Perhaps the most important example of paintings in South Asia dates from B.C. 1 to A.C. 5 century and is located in the Ajantā cave in India. It depicts Buddhist ascetics in frontal view, while other figures are depicted in three quarter face with their eyes contained within the line that forms the outer edge (**Figure 1**). Moving to the Ellora cave paintings executed between the 5th and 7th century, some figures show the eye in the far side pushed out of the facial line. These features are even more evident in the Jain manuscript paintings from the 14th to the 15th century (**Figure 2**). In its final stage, not only the extended eye, but foreheads as well confront the observer [Doshi 1985].

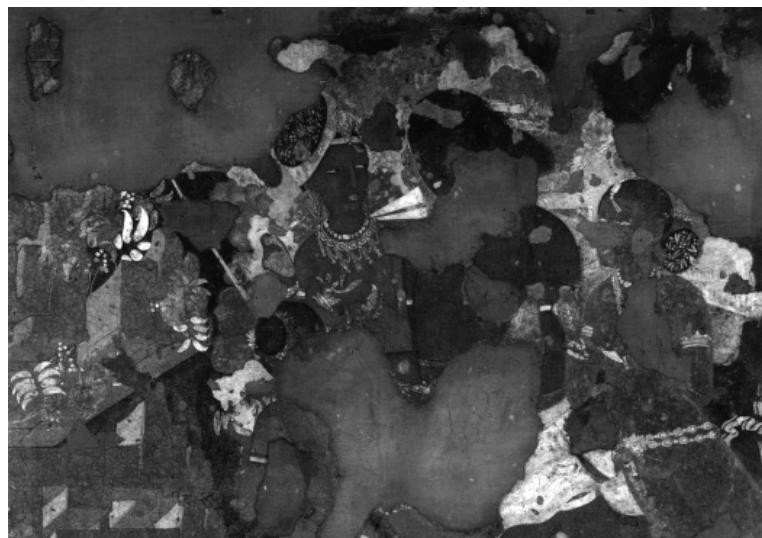


Figure 1: The heavenly beings

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Figure 2: Trishala enjoying the dance performance

In the early modern period, the profile view was the most prevalent mode of representing faces in painting. The Early Rājpūt painting style of the 16th century, previously known as the *Chaurapanchāsikā* style, represents the figural face in complete profile (**Figure 3**). Afterwards, the Hindu native states adopted a manner identical to Rājpūt painting in their depiction of profile faces. In contrast, Mughal painting maintained Persian influence in its early stage and applied a three quarter face as their artistic standard. In the 17th century, Mughal painting accepts the profile as a standard mode of face depiction (**Figure 4**), for the transition may be similar to that from the Jain style to the Early Rājpūt/*Chaurapanchāsikā* style.



Figure 3: Birhana and Champāvati in the room

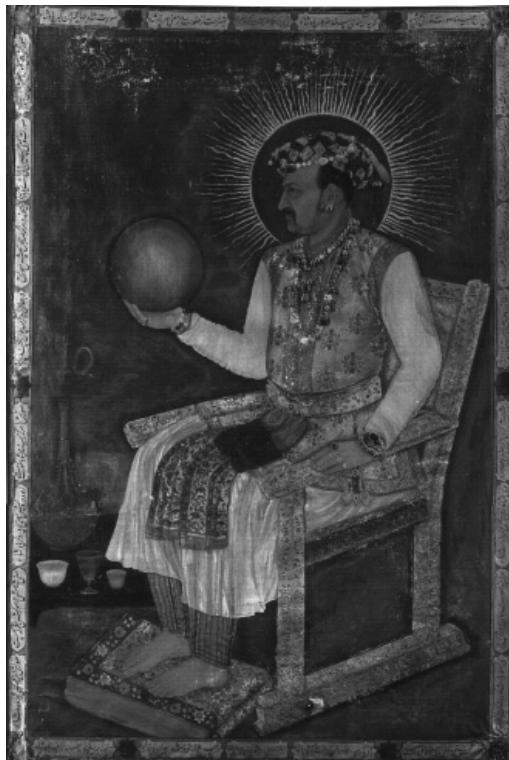


Figure 4: Jahangīr, fourth Mughal emperor, holding a globe

Contemporary art historians have aimed to identify the reason behind the profile depiction that developed from the ancient to the early modern period. Some ascribe this well-known representational mode to the feeling of peace that miniature painting evokes; others condemn its repetition and the fact that it confines the pictorial expression into repetitive stylistic models. It is certain, however, that this phenomenon is one of the biggest enigmas in the studies of South Asian art. On the basis of studies conducted by Chandra [1949] and Wright [2008], I choose to first survey previous studies on profiled figures. Subsequently, I investigate the religious significance of the three quarter face, the profile and frontal view.

I. Discourses by previous scholars

The first writings that dealt with the issue of profile figures in South Asian art kept the matter to a secondary position. Ghose is a pioneer in the discussion of three quarter face depiction. In his 1927 article, he originates this salient expression into the painters' fundamental desire to depict a statue on a plain canvas [Ghose 1927: 187, 278]. Coomaraswamy [1930: 7] mentions that the representation of eyebrow resulted in the extended eye, as far as the Ellora wall paintings were concerned. In contrast, Brown [1933: 16] points out that three quarter faces were a reflection of the statue embedded with glass eyes, which was popular among

the *Svētāmbara* school in Jainism. He notes that the origin of three quarter faces seemed to be different for each school.¹ It is remarkable that Brown associates such expression with the Central Asian tradition, where the Sāhī king in ‘two third’ view is represented as a Mongolian [Brown 1933: 23–24]. Afterwards, Chandra [1949: 101–104] comes to the aesthetic conclusion that the Jain style developed from the medieval to the modern, while he thereafter classifies those faces into Indian and Indianized Persian styles [Khandalavala and Chandra 1969: 48].

In the 1980s, art historians began to look at the issue on the basis of positive analysis. Losty [1982: 44] argues that this phenomenon is a technical issue rather than a religious and metaphysical one, for eyes protruded to the air before the face rotated in Jain painting. At the same time, he identifies the similarities with much earlier frescoes at Ajantā and Ellora that show human faces in three quarter face [Losty 1982: 43–44]. Considering the gradual transition from a three quarter face in Jain manuscript illustration to a profile one in Hindu book painting, he indicates that all artists involved in making these paintings were predominantly Hindus [Losty 1982: 48]. He also exemplifies the use of three quarter and side views by the figure represented on the illustrations of the *Hamzanāma* [Losty 1982: 48] and *Mandu Ni`matnāma* [Losty 1990: 11, 14] manuscripts, datable to about 1465 and ca. 1500 respectively. In one of the illustrations, some Muslim figures are depicted with three quarter faces, while Hindu figures are portrayed in full profile.

In addition, Doshi [1985: 48] explains that the subject of the *Kālakacharya-Kathā*, in which the monk Kālaka traveled beyond the Indus to ask for the aid of the Sāhī kings in his battle against the enemy, demanded ‘the physiognomy of the Mongol race’ with ‘farther protruding eye.’ Doshi must be seen as an advocate of Brown’s theory. Doshi infers that the models might have been foreign visitors to the local Muslim courts. Alternatively, this peculiar expression could have been the representation of an Islamic cliché from either Delhi-Sultanate painting or Iranian ceramic plates and bowls imported into Gujarat.

In the following phase, art historians began to tackle the issue of profiled figure more directly. Losty [1990] raises three presumable reasons for this depiction in his article entitled as “From three-quarter to full profile in Indian painting — revolutions in art and taste” in *Das bildnis in der kunst des orient*s. First, he maintains that a surge for realism in the reign of Jahangīr promoted the use of full profile as an appropriate view. This may be due to either Jahangīr’s resistance to his father Akbar who was always portrayed in three quarter face or to the preference of Hindu painters who constituted the majority of the studio during the reigns of Jahangīr and Shāh Jahān. Second, Losty insists that the painters during Jahangīr’s time

1 Chandra [1949] condemned Brown’s theory [1933] on the Jain sculpture embedded glass eyes. Chandra [1949: 103–104] differs from Brown on the facts that although Hindu and Buddhist idols bore glass eyes, no other sects than Jainism applied glass eyes to statue around the time, and that there is no description to be found in the medieval Sanskrit literature to support this.

were keen on the recoding of state scenes. Thus, they were asked to represent attendants faithfully. Third, he draws attention to the influence of European art. He points out that medallions and coins made during the European Renaissance portrayed people in full profile too. As they were imported to India, Jahangīr came to appear in the large gold coins in full profile. This might have been a model for profiled figures in picture. Lastly, Losty [1990: 159] argues that the predominance of Mughal painting incurred the diffusion of full profile into the studios of other Muslim courts as western naturalism penetrated into Indian painting.

In due course, the dispute on the three quarter face was replaced by that on Mughal portraiture. According to Koch [1997: 137], the painters at Akbar's atelier were confined to small formats to depict figures, that could not cultivate the 'personal traits' of the figure. At the same time, the portrayal of a group in narrow spaces demands special attention to the representation of the faces rather than the bodies. Koch [1997: p.138] also stresses that the ruling elites during Shāh Jahān's reign were 'deliberately' portrayed in profile to escape from 'realistic portrayal.' Here, Koch [1997: 144] indicates the influence of the latest European techniques as to embody the social status of a high class. It is remarkable that she draws attention to the connection with Egyptian art where wall paintings show figures in full profile and with Timurid painting which contains both three-quarter face and profile [Koch 1997: 161]. Only Koch attributes the Indian free expression to the influence of European art.

In another view, Necipoglu [2000: 56] alleges that the primary reason for the persistent use of the profile depiction at the time of Jahangīr and his successors is due to 'a codified expression of historical distance between the new Mughal emperors of the 17th century and their royal ancestors, between the present and the past.' It invokes the feeling of transcendence of the Mughal rulers, for their gaze does not aim at real life, or appreciators. Necipoglu [2000: 56] compares such profiled figures with the halo of an 'idol for admiration' and the 'semi-divine emperor apart from others.'

However, Stronge [2002: 32] demonstrates that the use of three quarter face and profile in the illustrations of the *Hamzanāma* survived earlier than the late 16th century or that it came from outside the empire in earlier periods. She also alleges that a single artist would use two stylistic conventions; the Western Indian style and the Iranian style [Stronge 2002: 32]. This is exemplified by the Western Indian style having been brought by the Iranian masters who preferred 'the joined eyebrows and oval face that epitomize the idealized "moon-faced" beauty of Persian poetry' [Stronge 2002: 34]. It is noticeable that Stronge introduces us to Pramod Chandra's idea that illustrations of the *Hamzanāma* witness the lost traditions and schools of art judging from the similarities with ancient wall painting [Chandra 1976: 68–69 in Stronge 2002: 32]. In addition, she notes that the process of a single master artist completing the final step of execution of a painting formalizes the 'characteristics of

particular individuals.' As far as Manohar from Jahangīr's atelier is concerned, he portrayed Jahangīr in profile within an unrealistic colored background, and then he applied profile to other characters in the picture, 'disguising the joins so that the characters seem to inhabit a fantastic landscape.' [Stronge 2002: 120] As she refers to Stchoukine's research, Stronge leads us to believe that painters borrowed the preexisting images with identical postures and sizes [Stchoukine 1929: 212–241 in Stronge 2002: 122–124].

Although the dispute continued throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the state of the art study was elaborately conducted by Wright in 2008. First of all, she argues that a profile is the most effective when it comes to realistic depiction of human faces [Wright 2008: 166]. Also, she maintains that a three quarter face better suits the depiction of actively moving figures, leading to the conclusion that a three quarter face was rather used in narratives paintings, whereas a profile was used in portraiture [Wright 2008: 166]. After careful evaluation of previous studies, Wright [2008: 165–170] came to look at the rendering of the face details. According to her survey of Jahangīr portraiture at the Chester Beauty Library, a couple of the portraits from the so-called Minto Album show different depictions. She acknowledges that there is a ten years' gap in the completion of two portraits by Bichitr. The later version depicts Jahangīr with a fuller and rounder face [Wright 2008: 168]. Intriguingly, the depictions of nose are significantly different between the two portraits; 'long with a noticeably downward-turned tip in the earlier work, as opposed to rounder and thicker in the later work.' We can see two examples of the former expression in the CBL's *Jahangīrnāma* painting by an anonymous painter. Also, Wright [2008: 169] explains that the same painter was engaged with largely different expression for noses because they referred to an 'existing model rather than from life,' which was painted in the earlier folio by 'an artist with firsthand knowledge of the emperor's features.' Moreover, Wright [2008: 170] importantly notes that, 'This focus on the head of the figure.....is typical of Mughal drawing in the time of Jahangir and, especially, Shah Jahan.'

These different arguments suggest that there is no single answer to the formation of profiled figures in early modern South Asia, and Branfoot [2017] mentions the geographical and chronological width of this phenomenon. Thus, I would like to propose a combination of two single answers to conclude this long controversy. I point out that things are different between Jain-Rājpūt painting and Mughal painting although they are associated with each other. In the following chapter, I explore the reason for the extended eye in Jain painting.

II. Evaluation and analysis

In my opinion, the dispute on profiled figures in South Asian art has nearly been resolved. However, scattered information needed to be made sense of. First of all, it is worthy considering Losty's initial idea that attributes the reason for the profiled figure to technical

and material aspects, chiefly because this issue can be found at different times and in different regions. At the same time, it is important to agree with Chandra that whether a figure is rendered in three quarter face or profile depends on the nature of the subject depicted. Brown's analysis too is important in that he indicates that the paintings reflect the cultural milieu of the subcontinent in the late medieval and early modern periods. As for Doshi, she proposes two presumable origins for the Mongolian face; Persian ceramic and painting.

Later studies predominantly focus on the phenomenon of Mughal painting, although the profile depiction was first seen in Jain manuscript painting, therefore distancing us from the fundamental measures. However, Koch's reference to Egyptian art brings us back to the empirical and practical discussion on the matter. The major achievement of art historians such as Koch, Stronge, Necipoglu and Wright is to have identified painters' deliberate choices for three quarter and profile on the basis of preceded models by masters in charge of the final stage of execution of the painting. Lastly, Wright's attention to the depiction of nose and the line drawing are seen as a reification and concretion of Losty's previous discourse that attributed the reason for the profiled figure to technical and material aspects.

In the light of previous literature discussing the rise and decline of the three quarter face, I will suggest the possibility that when a painter depicts South Asian people's faces that have a high nose and a deep eye socket, he cannot represent their face with precision without using the shading technique, which incurred the depiction of the extended eye in Jain painting. The profile facilitates the portrayal of the nose's height in a realistic way. As Losty and Doshi mentioned for Persian painting and the depiction of Sāhī kings, a figure tends to be frontal and eyes are included inside the outer line of the face. For instance, a Persian figure is depicted with a Mongolian face in pictures at the time (**Figure 5**), partly because Persian painting developed during the Ilkhāniyān dynasty originates in Chinese painting, partly because their dominant group was Mongolian. Furthermore, a manuscript of the *Hamzanāma* from the Delhi Sultanate courts (**Figure 6**) shows the main figures with three quarter faces explicating the Iranian ethnicity, whereas the dancers, by and large, are represented in profile and illustrating South Asian people rather than Iranians of the time. This argument supports latest scholarship on the idea that both the three quarter face and the frontal view stand for 'foreignness' in Rājpūt painting [Aitken 2010: 75].



Figure 5: Battle between Gardabhilla's forces and the Sāhī Kings



Figure 6: Hamza witnessing a dance performance

In addition, I wish to comment on some issues behind the dispute. First, it is assumed that the situation may vary depending on the mastery of the painter over the shading technique. Therefore, it is apparent that the painting technique deteriorated after the ancient period, in particular after those at the Ajantā caves. The extended eye was probably perceived as a sign rather than realistic representation of the figure's eye. Second, it is plausible that the painters at royal ateliers recognized the gap in ethnicity and represented it in painting. There is, however, no answer whether it is derived from icons from Iranian ceramics or the direct observation of Mongolian faces. Third, female faces tend to be depicted in profile on paintings from the Delhi Sultanate period. Fourth, the extended eye in Tibetan painting would be under the powerful influence of Indian painting, for Tibetans are different from South Asians in physiognomy.

Finally, it is remarkable that some of the minor casts tend to be painted in three quarter face in narrative painting in order to represent turning heads. This expression is the most frequently used by the Seu-Nainsukh workshop which was active in the Punjab hills in the 18th century (**Figure 7**) [Goswamy and Fischer 1992; Goswamy 1997]. The workshop had a more efficient organization and more developed painting techniques than other workshops in the hills. It is certain that they made use of a three quarter face to expand their expression and distinguish themselves from others.



Figure 7: Bihāri worshipping Krishna and Radhā

III. Conceptual and theological discussion

Now that we have reviewed some of the discussions on the formation of profiled figures, I would like to approach the conceptual and theological aspects of these facial modes. It is of importance to understand the reasons for profiled figures in Rājpūt painting that I argued

in the previous chapter is an underlying cause for profiled figures in Mughal painting. In order to seek the immediate cause, I will pay equal attention to both Islamic and Hindu interpretations of these facial modes: the frontal view, three quarter face and the profile view. I wish to answer more specifically the following questions: what is the difference of religious connotations between three quarter face, profile and frontal view? How was such distinction understood in other Islamic art such as Persian painting, the direct ancestor of Mughal painting? What is the gap between Hindu and Islamic perceptions of each mode?

In the Hindu context, the most important mode of representation for faces is the frontal view, used since the ancient wall-painting in Ajantā and Ellora caves for worship of the deities. This mode is closely related to the traditional conception of *darshan(a)*, literally ‘sight’ but in fact ‘an exchange of gazes’ between the *mūrti* (statue) and the devotees as the eyes of the sitter inevitably meet those of the audience. Beckerlegge [2001: 60] briefly mentions that ‘When standing in front of a sacred image, a Hindu worshipper is gazing upon a “likeness”.’ This process encodes symbolic meaning consumed in the system of religion [Beckerlegge 2001: 59]. The way of conveying a merit is always from a deity/saint to a devotee [Klostermaier 1989: 298]. One may emphasize with this religious practice even without being Hindu or South Asian, for it is underpinned by human fundamental perception and its process [Sanzaro 2007].

In the middle of the 16th century, the profile emerged as a ‘new’ standard in the Hindu paintings such as the *Chaurapanchāsikā* illustrations (**Figure 3**). This stood for profane people, particularly secular authority, including the Rājpūt rulers. This secularism may be seen as a significant turn in Indian or Hindu art previously inextricably linked to religious subjects. The secular mode of profiled figures enabled painters to depict non-narrative and non-divine people, and increased the diversity of subject and the regional diffusion across north India.

In contrast, a three quarter face was used for any figures in the ancient wall painting tradition. The three quarter face was replaced by a profile in the late 16th century, but the mode of representation has been in circulation until the present days. In the early modern period, the three quarter face was seen as mitigating the binary oppositions between frontal and profile views in accordance with Hindu culture that includes intermittent presences to bridge religious and secular worlds. For instance, Hindu goddesses were often represented with three quarter faces (**Figure 8**). Another example could be a rendition of *siddha* or ascetic. The former is a secondary deity in Hinduism, the latter is a transcendental person beyond the profane.²

² However, the gap between these views is often blurred because Shiva who is a major deity was sometimes depicted with a three quarter face as well [Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 206–207, pl.84]. Likewise, Krishna, avatar of Vishnu, who should be portrayed in three quarter face could be represented in profile (**Figure 7**) and sometimes in frontal view too. In the latter case, Krishna’s image was conflated with that of Vishnu himself [Goswamy and Fischer 1992: 304–305, pl.129].



Figure 8: The goddess in generosity and victory

In Islam, the first important element to note is that the *Qur'ān*, the Islamic sacred text, forbids the visual representation of God (*Allāh*) [Grabar 2005: 87–95].³ This prohibition had an influence on the depictions of Muhammad, the last prophet of Islam, and Ali, the first *Imām* of *Shī'ah* Islam. Their faces were sometimes covered by a cloth; sometimes depicted at the time of production, and later deliberately erased.⁴ Therefore, the frontal view which was used for Hindu deities did not often appear in traditional miniature paintings in the Islamic world before it met with the western influence. Only few portraits of rulers in manuscript paintings such as the *Kitāb al-Aghānī* ('the book of songs') show a frontal depiction of the face (Figure 9). These portraits tend to pay special attention to the symmetrical composition that the frontal depiction enhances best. Similarly, the frontal view provides the sitter with a sense of stability or dignity stemming from the geometrical symmetry.⁵

³ Furthermore, Islam evades the depiction of any human forms according to the second most holy text *Hadīth* ('utterance of the prophet'), which describes that creating a human image outrages the power of God [Bukhārī 2001: II 305, VI 349–350]. As often explained, the Persian word *musawwīr* stands for both designer and God. However, painting was unceasingly produced under the patronage of almost all Muslim rulers on the basis of the theory that the painted images which cast no shadow are not regarded as the violation of God's right [Arnold 1928: 9]. According to the *Ain-i-Akbarī* (bk1, ain 34), Akbar, third Mughal emperor, contended that painting would be useful for the devotees to pursue their religious goal and never be blasphemous [Dehejia 1997: 309].

⁴ As to the depictions of Muhammad and other prophets, please see [Arnold 1928: 91–116; Okasha 1981: 43–104; Gruber 2009].

⁵ The frontal view was sometimes used for minor casts [Masuya 2014: pl.20].

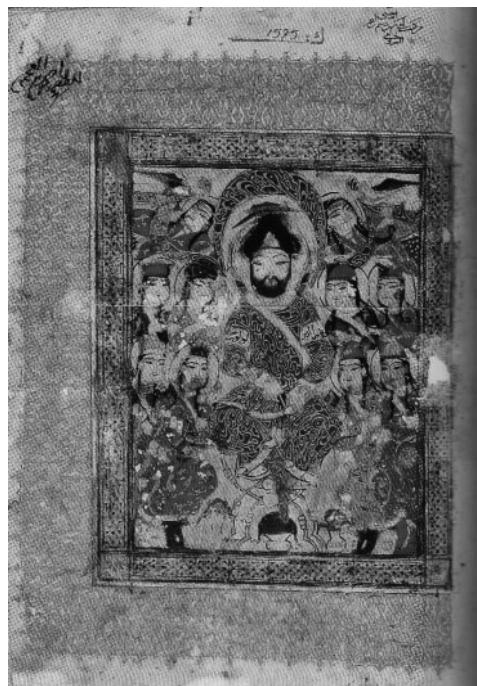


Figure 9: A portrait of ruler

For these reasons, the three quarter face inevitably played a pivotal role in representing human faces in Islamic painting. It could be a product of concession that hid the intention to worship the sitter. This mode was dominant across the Islamic world including Arabic countries, Persia (Iran) and Turkey until the strong western influence became more evident. In the context of South Asia, a three quarter face was related to the authority of Tīmūr, the great successor of the Mongol Empire, in Persia. When Islamic powers penetrated into the subcontinent during the Delhi Sultanate period, all rulers retained and relied on the three quarter depiction from the Persian artistic tradition to reinforce the authenticity of their dynasties (**Figure 6**). Even Akbar, third Mughal emperor and great patron of art, was depicted in three quarter face in narratives such as *Akbarnāma*, and most portraiture.

However, the predominance of profile after the reign of Jahangīr, fourth Mughal emperor, is noticeable in the history of Islamic art. I believe that this transition was the inception of Mughal independent consciousness, emancipating from Persian authority which preceded Islamic dynasties with pride and dignity. Jahangīr used to be depicted with a globe and a halo in portraiture. In a portrait (**Figure 4**), Jahangīr ('world seizer' in Persian) is literally holding a globe and his head is encircled by a golden halo which, Stronge [2010: 29, 31] claims, originates in the Iranian concept of *farr-i izādī* or 'Divine Glory' although its physical origin is seen as the Christian image in European art. However, I would say that this expression of a nimbus was more than Persian and Christian traditions, that is to say, it

was the representation of Mughal emperors' superiority to Persian kings and Jesus Christ, considering the presence of a globe in Jahangīr's hand. This idea is inextricably linked to the innovative nature of the profile depiction. In his forthcoming book, Branfoot [2017] points out that the production of biographies by early Mughal emperors and nobles such as Bābur and Jahangīr was unusual in Islamic history, and indeed regarded them as manifestation of self-awareness. The Mughal Empire decided to distance culturally and politically from the Middle East and take root in South Asia. In other words, Mughal artists deliberately replaced the three quarter face with a profile in order to meet emperors' demand for religious and political autonomy. The profile became a new mode of expression and a cultural device to manifest the unique authority and identity of the Mughals.⁶

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the formation of a standard of the profile depiction and its struggle with the three quarter face in the history of South Asian painting. Ghose attributes the reason for the extended eye to the painter's desire to depict an object in two-dimensional painting. Coomaraswamy ascribes it to the depiction of eyebrows. Brown insists that the extended eye stemmed from the Jain sculpture embedded with a glass eye. Chandra believes in the spontaneous development from the three quarter to the profile. Losty points out that the transition is a technical issue. Doshi mentions that the three quarter face is a depiction of Mongolian faces. Losty later maintains that the surge for profile derived from European naturalism and realism in early Mughal painting. In contrast, Koch asserts that the profile was an avoidance of realistic portrayal, especially with regards to Shāh Jahān's figure. Necipoglu also claims that the profile was the expression of the emperor's transcendental quality. Stronge draws attention to the process of painting production: the master painter of the atelier usually completes the final step. Wright indicates that the three quarter face suits moving figure, while a profile one enables a more realistic rendition of the human face. In comparison with these previous studies, I believe that figures in South Asian painting have been depicted in profile due to the nature of their physical features such as eyes and nose.

Furthermore, I argued that facial patterns in ancient Indian wall-painting had split into three categories by the early modern era; the frontal view, profile and three quarter face. On the one hand, in Hinduism, the frontal face remains for worshipping deities. The profile has

⁶ Outside South Asia, the profile was sometimes used in Turkey and Persia. In the Ottoman Empire, a portrait of II Mehmed executed at the end of the 15th century depicts him in profile as Istanbul artists emulated portraits by European artists such as Constatno da Ferrara from Napoli and Gentile Bellini from Venice. The portrait is seen as a copy of the portrait medal [Cagman and Tanindi 1986: cat.no.128]. Likewise, an underglaze colour tile produced in Teheran or Isfahan in the late 19th century under the rule of the Qajar dynasty renders in profile Jamshīd, a king in the long epic poem of the *Shāhnāmeh* ('Book of Kings') by the Persian poet Ferdowsī between c. 977 and 1010 CE. Masuya mentions that his image may be derived from reliefs of Persepolis or so-called Takht-e-Jamshīd (from the private conversation held in December 2016). These examples are an exceptional case of the use of the profile in Islamic painting.

become the standard for profane authorities. The three quarter face is used for secondary deities such as goddesses and ascetics. On the other hand, in Islam, a frontal view was not popular due to Islam's strict prohibition of idolatry, although it was sometimes used in portraits of ruler. The three quarter face which was dominant in Persian painting might also be used as a concessional expression for a frontal view. Intriguingly, the profile depiction seems to have illustrated a manifestation of independency of the Mughals from Persian culture.

It seems to me that the profile was an efficient method of communication with the local Hindu culture. Along with the invasion of the three quarter face from paintings of the Delhi Sultanate, the application of profile into manuscript paintings by Hindu artists was evident (**Figure 3**). In a Hindu perspective, the application of a profile in early Mughal painting may speak for the acceptance of their tradition by new rulers, which facilitated the conflation of Mughal and Rājpūt paintings, namely Islamic and Hindu artistic traditions. It is through the application of this profile that Mughal painting was dominant throughout the subcontinent and lasted for almost 300 years.

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List of Figure

1. "The flying heavenly being": in the Vākātaka period (the late 5th century), tempera, approximately 84×115cm, in the veranda of the 17th hole in the Ajantā cave.
2. "Trishala enjoying the dance performance": from the manuscript of *Kalpa Sūtra*, in 1465, Jaunpur, possessed by Narasimhajini Polno Jhana Bandara.
3. "Birhana and Champāvati in the room": from the manuscript of *Chaurapancāsikā*. In the early 16th century, possessed by Gujarat Museum.
4. "Jahangīr, fourth Mughal emperor, holding a globe": attributed to Abu'l-Hasan, in 1617, the Mughal atelier, 21.1×14.3 cm, Opaque watercolor and gold on cotton, Private Collection, copied from Crill and Jariwala 2010.
5. "Battle between Gardabhatta's forces and the Sāhī Kings": *Kālakacharya-Kathā*, paper, ca.1440, Mandū, Lalbai Dalpatbhai Institute of Indology, Ahmedabad.
6. "Hamza witnessing a dance performance": *Hamzanāma* manuscript, Gwālior-Malwā, c.1475, Staatsbibliothek Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Orientabteilung, Berlin.
7. "Bihāri worshiping Krishna and Radhā": by Nainsukh, in the 1760s, 24.8×32.7cm, possessed by Dr. Alvin O. Bellak in Philadelphia.
8. "The goddess in generosity and victory": from the manuscript of the goddess's narrative, the 7th folio, in the late 17th century, 24.8×21 cm, possessed by Dr. Alvin O. Bellak in Philadelphia
9. "A portrait of ruler": a frontispiece of the 17th volume of the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, edited by Isfahānī, Mosul (Iraq), 616/1219–20, Feyzullah Efendi 1566, Istanbul National Museum