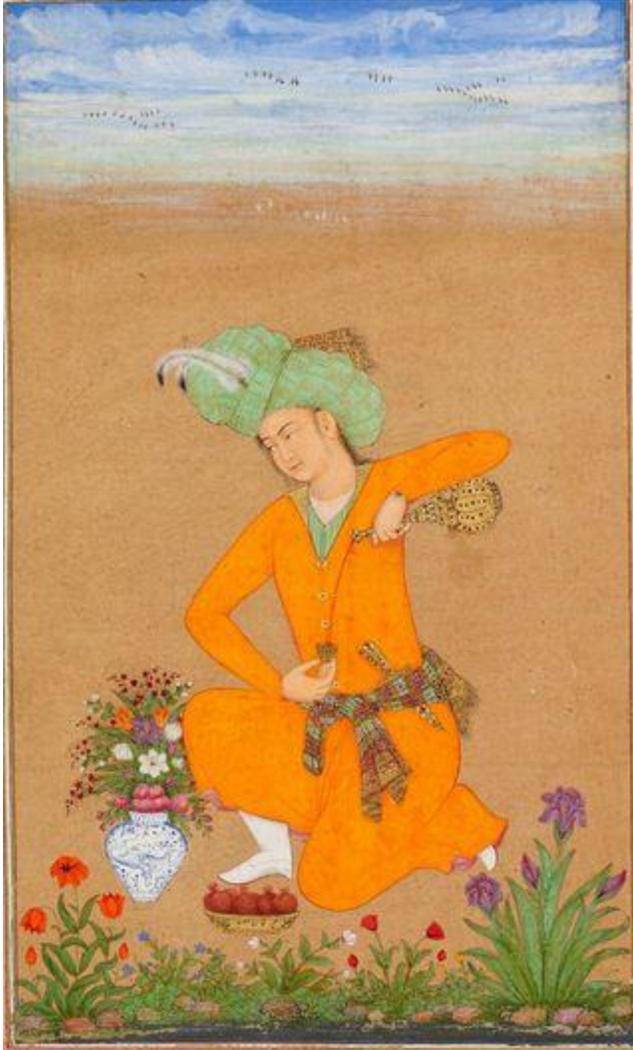


# Mughal flower studies and their European inspiration

The Dara Shikoh Album (Add.Or.3129) is one of the most famous and important Mughal artefacts in the British Library's collections. Dara Shikoh (1615-58) was the eldest son and favourite of the Emperor Shah Jahan (reg. 1627-58). He was married in 1633 to his cousin Nadira Banu Begum and in 1641 gave her the album which, it was argued recently (Losty and Roy 2012, pp. 124-37), the prince had assembled between 1631 and 1633 and not as normally assumed between his marriage in 1633 and the gift in 1641. When I was researching the album, which is famous above all for its flower studies, I recognised a new European source of inspiration that had not previously been noticed. Scholars of Mughal painting, following Robert Skelton's seminal paper of 1972, have become increasingly aware of how Mughal artists used European prints to help both in their individual paintings of flowers and in the floral borders of the imperial albums of Jahangir (reg. 1605-27) and Shah Jahan. Since it was possible to publish only the British Library's Mughal paintings in our 2012 book, this note expands on some of the references made therein.

The only signed and dated painting in the album is by the otherwise mysterious artist Muhammad Khan, who was possibly from the Deccan and engaged by Dara Shikoh when the Emperor's court was in Burhanpur 1630-32. My attention focussed on the vase which is filled with a bouquet of many different sorts of flowers and is very unlike contemporary Mughal depictions of vases of flowers in paintings.



A prince in Persian costume pouring wine. Inscribed on the bowl in Persian: '*amal-i Muhammad Khan musavvir sanna 1043*' ('work of Muhammad Khan the artist, the year 1043/1633–4'). Add.Or.3129, f. 21v. 

While vases of flowers are occasionally seen in contemporary Mughal party scenes, they are normally slender and filled with a single type of flower arranged in two dimensions. This extravagant bouquet in Muhammad Khan's painting seems instead derived from a European exemplar, such as occur in several engraved florilegia of the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In one of them, the *Florilegium* series of prints made by [Adriaen Collaert](#) and published by Philips Galle in Antwerp, first in 1587 and again in 1590, the third plate is an elaborate bouquet of various flowers arranged in a vase much as in Muhammad Khan's version.



Adriaen Collaert, *Florilegium*, published by Philips Galle, Antwerp, 1590. 555.d.23.(3.), pl. 3

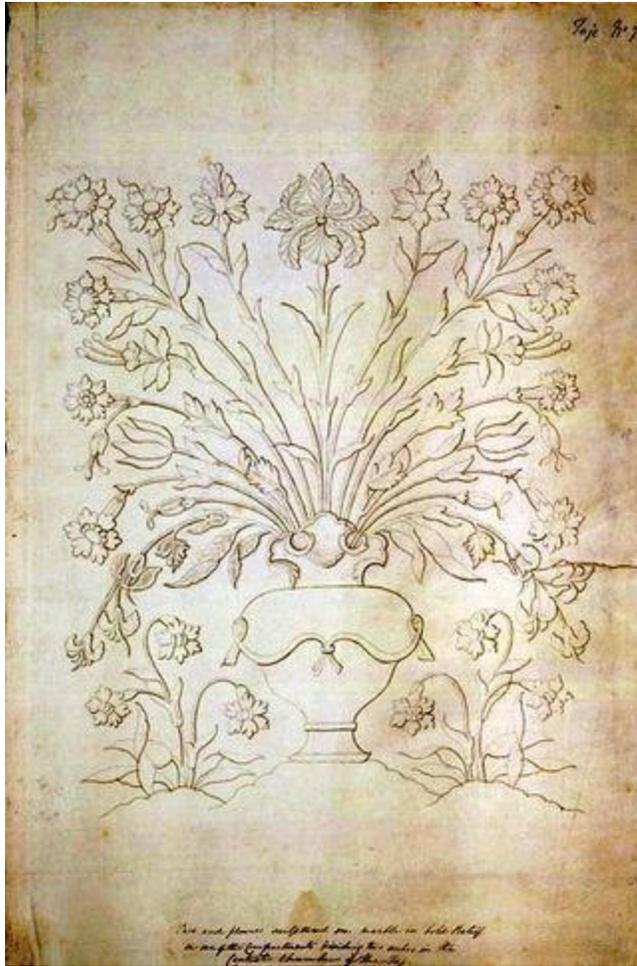


So far as I am aware this *Florilegium* has not been identified before as a source for Mughal flowers studies, yet it can be shown as we shall see in a moment to have been a comparatively early arrival at the Mughal court. Muhammad Khan has modified the decoration on his vase: the image of a lion bringing down a large deer, perhaps a nilgai, is obviously of Indian inspiration despite its blue and white colouring, but the shape is not Chinese but derived from the sort of classical vase with wide shoulders and comparatively narrow base seen in Collaert's engraving, although in the Mughal version without a foot.



Vase of narcissi with covered cups, intarsia detail from the tomb of Itimad al-Daula, Agra, begun 1622. Photo by William Dalrymple, 2013, and reproduced with his kind permission

The apparently haphazard arrangement of flowers in a vase in the European manner would not have been thought suitable for execution in stone in a Mughal monument, so when bulbous vases containing a single variety of flowers make their appearance in Mughal art in the intarsia and painted decoration of the tomb of Itimad al-Daula in Agra begun in 1622, the floral arrangement has been beautifully regularized and flattened rather as in Mughal party scenes.



Vase of flowers in marble relief on the dado of the Taj Mahal tomb chamber, begun 1631.. Agra artist, c. 1810-15. Add.Or.1771. 

They appear most famously carved in marble in the dado of the tomb chamber of the Taj Mahal in the 1630s, where the vase again is clearly of European classical inspiration and with its swags and foot is almost certainly derived from Collaert's vase. Here, although the flowers are varied as in the exemplar, they form flattened sprays in mirror symmetry around the central iris. Ebba Koch in her book on the Taj Mahal suggests C.J. Vischer's engraving of a vase of flowers of 1635 as a possible source (Koch 2006, figs. 338 and 339), but Collaert's vase of 1587-90 is much closer.

The Dara Shikoh album is celebrated for its exquisite and innovative flower paintings which, like the portraits, are arranged in matching pairs. Some seem almost naturalistic, as if done directly from nature, although certain characteristics such as the hovering butterflies suggest that this is not the case but rather that European herbals served as the ultimate inspiration.



Flower studies. Attributed to Muhammad Khan, 1630-33. Add.Or.3129, f.67v 

One of the most beautiful studies of naturalistic flowers in the album is found in another page attributed to Muhammad Khan, where six different species of flowers are laid out as specimens on the page. Such an arrangement seems to be derived from earlier paintings by Mansur, the foremost of Jahangir's natural history painters, whose vanished album of the spring flowers of Kashmir painted in 1621 is one of the chief of our losses of Mughal paintings.



Left: Lilies, signed by Mansur *Jahangirshahi*, c. 1605-12. From the *Gulshan Album*, Golestan Palace Library, Tehran, Ms 1663, p. 103. With kind permission of the Golestan Palace Library. Right: Lilies, from Adriaen Collaert's *Florilegium*, Antwerp, 1590, 555.d.23.(3.), pl. 6. 

One of Mansur's rare surviving flower studies is included in Jahangir's great album in Tehran now known as the *Gulshan Album*. Previous scholarship concurred that Mansur's flower studies all date from 1620 or thereabouts, but Susan Stronge has pointed out that Mansur must have done this study before he was given the title of *Nadir al-'Asr*, Wonder of Time, which he is how he signs himself on paintings that can be dated to 1612 and later (2008, pp. 95-96). On the other hand, since he uses the soubriquet *Jahangirshahi*, this suggests that he was already regarded as a master artist. Stronge proposed that in this study Mansur was influenced by two of the individual plants published in John Gerard's *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plants*, 1597, reversing the engravings, but suggesting that the ultimate source was a still undiscovered *Florilegium*. The subjects of engraved florilegia were much copied from one publication to another. Turning again to Collaert's *Florilegium* of 1590, it can be seen that she was right.

Mansur's painting of lilies has always struck me as a somewhat clumsy arrangement of flowers compared with the elegance of the Dara Shikoh page. However, the arrangement of different kinds of flowers all from the same species, in this instance lilies, is of course derived from European florilegia, which are concerned with botany, not with aesthetics. It can readily be seen that in this case Mansur reproduces the entirety of plate 6 from Collaert's *Florilegium* the right way round and in an exact correspondence. Clearly he was not familiar with lilies in nature since he has mistaken the trumpet part of the flower for green sepals. So far from this being a masterpiece of Mansur's maturity as is often proclaimed, it is in fact an immature study from early in Jahangir's reign. Just as Abu'l Hasan and other artists of the period painted over or

copied European engravings of Christian religious imagery to help them develop a more naturalistic approach to the rendering of volume and space, so Mansur is using a European print to help him find his way into the naturalistic depiction of flowers.

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#### Tags