

Imperial Art and Architecture in India
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Summarized by Timothy Doran

Empires existed in India long before the British Empire. Ashoka of the Mauryan Dynasty, in the 3rd century BC, was an important early emperor. He claimed control of huge areas beyond his homeland, and left inscriptions in many places. His control was reinforced by his adoption of a new religion, Buddhism. Like Constantine, it paid off to adopt a new religion and to use that to justify one's presence over a huge area where the new religion might appeal. Like Constantine, it was a genuine conversion. One of his inscriptions states that he had slaughtered so many people on the East coast of India that he decided to give up warfare and become a Buddhist. His inscriptions are on pillars often at places where pilgrims came to visit, since they were places the Buddha had visited during his lifetime. At the top were images that were ambiguous and could be read as emblems of Ashoka's power or the Buddha's power. For example, a single lion is standing on one pillar, and four lions are standing at the site of the Buddha's first sermon at Sarnath, and these held a large wheel on top. The wheel is a symbol of the Buddha *and* of the emperor. Chinese pilgrims later described this as an emblem at the top of a pillar made of jade. But it is, in fact, made of finely polished sandstone.

The second empire in India is that of Mughals, which made the term "mogul" synonymous with power and wealth. They originated in Central Asia and pushed down to eventually control a good deal of North India. These rulers left emblems of their power such as forts, like the one in the earlier capital of Agra and one in Delhi known as the [Red Fort](#). The latter is still important for the Indian state.

The interior of the fort in Delhi shows that simple power is not the only effect. The use of marble which appears in great quantity in the reign of the third great Mughal ruler was used on buildings as a sign of control over another part of India where marble was quarried, the region of Rajasthan. The carving is fine, delicate. The motifs allude to the ideal ruler, which is how Shah Jahan presented himself. For example, [a scale of justice](#) alludes both to ideology within Muslim tradition, and perhaps also to his contact with Europe.

The [Taj](#) in Agra contained elaborate forms, such as ogival domes, lots and lots of marble, and precious or semi-precious stones inlaid over the sides. It was an emblem of respect for the wife who died in childbirth and an emblem of political power. It represents the throne of God on Earth. The gardens in front represent the picture of Paradise in the Persian tradition. Shah Jahan was not the only builder of forts and tombs. Akbar, the first main Mughal ruler, made a tomb for his father in Delhi, with simpler forms.

The Mughals also left us paintings, paintings of themselves illustrating historical documents, including the Shah Jahan-Nama, "the book of the king of the world." In these paintings Shah Jahan is shown in many moments. The interior of the forts is

depicted meticulously. In one picture he receives two of his sons who are admitted to the high level along with him. These are the Mughals and their close courtiers. They are differentiated in face and clearly shown as present when Shah Jahan received his sons and decided that a particular one was the son who would inherit the throne. Hierarchy and tribute to his power is implicit. A [darbar](#) is the word used for this kind of court assembly depicted here.

[Bahadur Shah II was the last Mughal emperor](#) and is depicted in a picture. That invokes the same symbols even though he did not control as much. He alludes to those old symbols. He is shown as an old man with a white beard and not attended by, or in control of, such a wide frame of reference. He wrote sad poetry under the pen name Zafar. The writing on the wall says that this was painted in 1838 and shows the exalted king of kings. He had the misfortune to tangle with the British in the mid-nineteenth century.

The British were present first as traders, mainly along the coasts. When they were there in the guise of the East India Company, power centered in the ports of Calcutta and Madras/Chennai. They gradually expanded inward, protecting various Indian states. By 1889 all India was thought of as the British Raj.

The British imperial rulers emulated the Mughals in a few ways. They copied their buildings, such as the [Brighton Pavilion](#) on the South coast of Great Britain. It is crowned by Indian domes and is surrounded by a nice British lawn. In 1802, George IV created the pavilion as a vacation place for the royal family.

In the mid-nineteenth century a hiccup occurred in this process. The British called it the Sepoy Mutiny. Sepoys are soldiers, both Muslim and Hindu. In 1857, according to the British they “rebelled”. The Indians today rightly call it The First War for Independence. The army questioned the necessity of British control and resisted the colonial power, unsuccessfully. After this, the Raj (or government or “rule”) was confirmed in other forms of emulation. The British staged their own darbars. Their viceroy was surrounded in 1903 by princes of all the states of India paying tribute to him. In a highly staged [1911 photograph we see the British king and queen](#) were seated on a platform covered in a rug, above the attendant figures below. These are darbar scenes but not as effective as the Mughal paintings: they do not convey hierarchy in the same way.

In this independence movement, mutiny, or whatever we call it, poor [Bahadur Shah](#) became associated with rebellion. The British imprisoned him and sent him to Burma in exile, where he died in 1862, addicted to opium.

To represent the empire, the British also sent their own artists to paint pictures of India. Two artists, William and Thomas Daniell, made a trip to India in the late eighteenth century. They skirted the coasts, visiting all the sites of British power, and they also traveled inland. The Taj Mahal was painted of course, enriched with lots of greenery that may have been the painters’ invention.

The Daniells made huge 3’ x 2’ lightly tinted engravings to convey the exotic beauty and romance of India. They enforced the notion that in the present, India was a land of

deserted ruins that had come down from its past glory. The Asian Art Museum in San Francisco has a complete set of their “Oriental Scenery” engravings.

The other way in which Indian art served British control was paintings made for Englishmen in India as they were moving from merchant status to ruling status. Officers of the British crown usually employed Indian artists, and often chose painters who had worked for the very late Mughals. The British found their meticulous detail attractive. They are often known as “[company school paintings](#)” after the East India Company, and were often made for political officers. One is shown surrounded by dancing girls, smoking a hookah and enjoying the life of the Saab or master in the colonial world.

Lord Elijah Impey was a judge of the British court in Calcutta, quite busy teaching justice in India. In the late eighteenth century, his wife was left at home to run the household full-time, [supervising an army of servants as we see in a painting](#). Mary Impey wanted a record of the plants and animals around her. She also commissioned paintings, some quite large, pictures of birds and plants of Calcutta. The artists captured them with meticulous detail and with feeling for them, which was part of the Mughal painting tradition. He could catch a stork in its characteristic ungainly walk, eating its lunch, with sympathy for the animal as well as observation of, for example, all the different kinds of feathers. He could capture plants, such as lotuses rising from rich and huge leaves and stems that grow underwater, all carefully caught. Lady Impey’s album is powerful and somewhat breathtaking as a vision of what India meant both to local artists and to an Englishwoman who was their patron.

Company school albums showed people doing things, the process of various Indian crafts, such as a shoemaker. A picture of one captures all the details of shoe-making and seat-making by weaving or caning bamboo strands for furniture. This process impacted British furniture. The whole process was captured in another image less of individuals doing things than of the craft *per se*.

Some of the photographic images which made their way into photo albums in the late nineteenth century deliberately group together holy men, curiosities, and ethnologic images, which record the individuals as anthropological specimens enabling British classification.

In the 1840s, created for the last British resident of Delhi keeping an eye on Bahadur Shah was book painted by an artist whose name tells us he was a Muslim, the kind of artist who might have worked for the Mughals himself: Mazhar Ali Khan. The resident was Thomas Metcalfe. He had a book created of the views in Delhi, called [The Delhi Book](#), for his daughter Emily. She was about to be married in England. He thought this book of views of the city would be a nice gift for her. Parts of the city are illustrated in it, with his own notes in English. The buildings in the book were the familiar ones, including minarets drawn by the Danielles half a century earlier. There are notes below it identifying it as a great, important monument. Tellingly, the ruins are less scenes of catastrophe in the book than in the Danielles’ illustration.

Last image recording Bahadur Shah in a procession celebrating the Muslim holiday of Id. He is on an elephant. Thomas Metcalfe is on another one, distinguished by wearing a top

hat. A procession becomes a good story, an emblem of religious piety for the Muslims, and an emblem of British presence as well.

The last and most vivid expression of British imperial identity in India takes us back to architecture. In 1912, the capital of the Raj which had been in Calcutta was shifted to Delhi, capital of the Mughals. Delhi required some new buildings for this purpose. Most of the Mughal fort built by Shah Jahan was in Old Delhi. The British needed a new place to mark their own power. They employed neoclassical architects, Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker, to design a new city ([New Delhi](#)). It begins with a more regular concentric arrangement of streets. Roman arches were combined with some Islamic domes and early Indian Buddhist forms as well. The big roads give parts of Delhi a spaciousness and grandeur that recalls other planned cities like Washington D.C. and Paris.