

The art, opulence and might of the Mughals

Exhibition | The V&A's
treasure trove displays the
wealth and global reach of
India's rulers. By *Jan Dalley*

It was "the treasury of the world", according to Sir Thomas Roe, writing in 1614 to the future Charles I from Agra, where he was England's first ambassador to the Mughal emperor. The court whose wealth, splendour and culture so dazzled him was that of Jahangir, ruler over ever-expanding territories that stretched from the Himalayas almost to the tip of India. Alongside their political and economic power, Roe witnessed the range and depth of the Mughals' cultural achievements, with art forms from carpetmaking to jewellery, calligraphy, painting, weaving, fabrics and more raised to a then unparalleled level of sophistication.

Jahangir is one of the three Mughal rulers in focus at the V&A's *The Great Mughals: Art, Architecture and Opulence*, which showcases this golden age of craftsmanship and artistry with a parade of startlingly magnificent objects and pictures.

Jahangir's father, Akbar, began his 50-year reign in 1556 and was, by all accounts, an exemplary monarch. Islamic invaders from the north-east, the Mughals had subjugated a largely Hindu population, yet Akbar ruled with surprising religious open-mindedness. He expanded and unified his empire not only through military campaigns but also through diplomacy and economic policy, efficient bureaucracy and conciliation of his highly diverse conquered subjects.

And he vigorously encouraged the arts. Paintings here reflect his ambitious building programmes but we also see his imperial workshops starting to produce luxury goods, textiles and carpets using stunning precious materials. Craftsmen came from across the empire – carpetmakers from central Asia, mothers-of-pearl inlay masters from Gujarat – but importantly from Iran.

The Persian influence is significant at every turn here, and its fusion with more local traditions, especially the Hindu, created what became a distinctive Mughal style.

Most important to Akbar was his House of Books – perhaps



oddy, since he could neither read nor write. Yet he built a library of incredible magnificence, judging from the elaborate and intricate calligraphic art on display here, much of it in Persian (the lingua franca of the court) and drawing on the skills of Iranian masters. The painting styles of Akbar's court show similar influence, but with a distinctive twist – one illustration from an 18th-century Persian epic shows a beautiful princess welcoming her lover by letting down her long hair for him to climb up. Above in the clouds, all is swirling fantasy and romance, but below in the real world the depiction of a garden with its watering system and the ducks on a pond is powerfully realistic.

In fact we glean information about everything from clothing, jewellery and meals to tilework and building techniques from

the detail in the pictures here. And the growing extent of international cultural links that mirrored the political. Portuguese traders from Goa imported gemstones along with European thinking, and Akbar invited European craftsmen to teach foreign techniques such as enamelling on gold and silver, which quickly became established in the Mughal kitchen. A glorious thumb ring, of gold set with rubies and emeralds and enamelled in one, is of the almost impossibly intricate pieces shown here.

The working of nephrite jade was another imported material skill brought to stupendous heights in the Mughal courts – an example here is a small elegant wine jug (wine was clearly important throughout this period), made of shaped jade encrusted with gold, rubies and emeralds. It is jaw-droppingly pretty, the epitome of outrageous, just because we can luxury.

There was export too: a helix curly shield on display here is covered with tiny figures, horsemen and animals among elaborate foliage and patterning (another Persian style, *razm e hazm*, scenes of the hunt, feasts and war) tightly worked in glittering mother-of-



Clockwise from main: the Giant Zumurud Shah flees with his army (c1562-77); painting of a zebra by Gansur (1621); gold thumb ring set with rubies and emeralds (c1610-20); wine cup of white nephrite jade, made for Shah Jahan (1657)

1610: George Frederic Handel; 1621: Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum.

pearl inlay, a masterpiece of metalwork and marquetry. Its chief interest, though, is that by 1599 it had found its way to Florence, in the armoury of Ferdinando de Medici – possibly a diplomatic gift?

By the time of Akbar's son Jahangir, who had a throne designed by a jeweller from Bordeaux, details in paintings show more and more cultural imports alongside the home production: Ottoman velvets, Chinese ceramics and brocades. Even exotic animals were cultural incomers: painters faithfully depicted a rather sad-looking zebra brought by emissaries from Ethiopia, a turkey cock from North America, every feather and wobbly tail carefully defined.

This outreach to the world grew even further in the reign of the third king featured in this show, Jahangir's son Shah Jahan. Paintings show European traders carrying a box of Japanese lacquer, an emerald from Colombia; an intriguing image of a princely garden picnic includes wine poured from a Persian ceramic ewer into Venetian goblets, with Chinese porcelain on a Japanese table, while a guest sports a robe of

Chinese brocade. Yet all this cultural input is melted into what is now, after nearly five decades of the 17th century, firmly established Mughal style. That had begun to atomise with the Shah Jahan took the throne in 1627 after a brutal campaign – despite calm and elegance of royal in-laws here, successions were a bloodbath, chiefly brought about by trying one's many competing brothers-in-law. Once installed on the throne, however, he presided over Mughal court life at its very peak and remembered, of course, for creating Taj Mahal, mausoleum and love letter to his favourite wife Mumtaz Mahal, who died giving birth to a 14th child.

The V&A's curators give superb offhand treatment to Mughal art: famous and enduring monuments, brief video, a model, some explicit discussion of the tombs, but not about it. The wall texts do map out, however, that the Taj Mahal is a nature design, of white marble with semi-precious stones to multicoloured flowers and leaves, cately curving and twisting, given a long stylistic history in Islamic art. (Even today: look at the pillars and even the central courtyard.)

The Mughal court became a magnet for foreign visitors, drawn by its magnificence and riches

Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque Dhab, opened in 2007.)

During Jahan's 50-year reign, Mughal court became a magnet for foreign ambassadors and potentates. Visitors of all sorts, drawn by its splendour, its riches, its lucrative opportunities. Under his rule, the Mughals flourished accordingly. So did the story! The empire still had a way to go, after Jahan's son Aurangzeb power in 1658 while Jahangir and initiated another 50-year reign. Aurangzeb was a hard taskmaster, imprisoned him for the rest of his life and clung on to the throne himself.

Although Aurangzeb expanded Mughal empire to its furthest extent, he made the point that the art styles of these three magnificent empires roughly 1560-1660, had an enduring appeal for centuries afterwards, that out the subcontinent and into the Islamic world, and beyond.

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