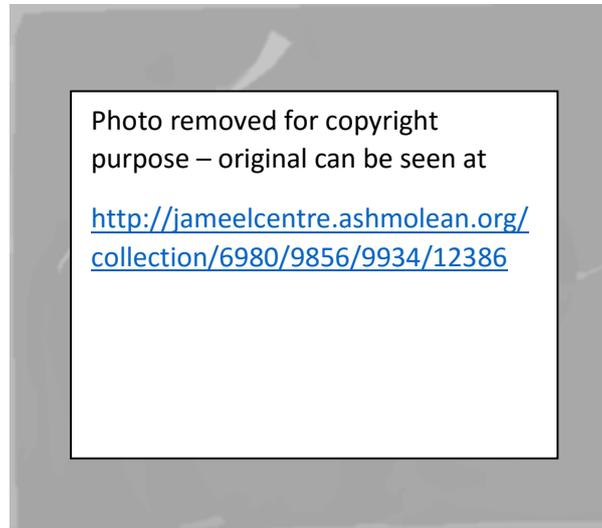


*Sultan Muhammad Adil Shah and Ikhlas Khan riding an elephant
Bijapur by Haidar Ali*



Gouache with gold on paper, c.1645, © The Collection of Howard Hodgkin

This painting shows the Sultan Muhammad Shah riding his elephant accompanied by Ikhlas Khan. The elephant itself almost fills the frame, its feet touch the bottom of the painting and its tail and tusks almost reach the two sides. This conveys a strong impression of the size of the animal, something which is enhanced by the fact that the headdress of the Sultan also nearly touches the frame at the top of the picture – overall it almost seems as though the painting is ‘bursting out of its frame’.

The elephant is richly adorned with chains, bells and garlands. It is covered with a large saddle cloth which, although richly decorated, has not been painted in great detail. The Sultan is shown in rich clothing and with a ‘halo’ or aureole behind his head. The person behind him seems to be fanning the rider with a cloth.

The elephant is painted in a dark hue but its facial expressions are well rendered giving it character. The overall impression of the painting is quite sombre due to the dark mass of the elephant and the deep hue of the plain blue background. Overall the viewer is left with an impression of the sheer scale of the size of the elephant.

The website of the Asmolean Museum¹ states that “This painting is as much a portrait of a prized royal elephant as of its distinguished riders”.

According to Topsfield and Beach (1991 p38)² Ikhlas Khan (the second person on the elephant) was an “Abyssinian slave who had become prime minister”. They also state that “The main purpose of the painting, however, is to be a portrait of a specific elephant, rather than one of ruler and courtier”. They also comment on the stylistic character of the painting where this Deccani artist

Part 1: Images of oriental art

emphasises "the silhouette of the animal, rather than its volume and physical weight, and the trunk and legs are arranged to create lively surface rhythms".

I was intrigued by what seemed to be a halo around the Sultan's head, similar to that in western religious paintings. Stronge comments on this in Guy and Swallow (1990 p82)³ when describing a Mughal painting she notes "how quickly elements of western art were absorbed into mainstream courtly styles. Encircling the prince's head a golden halo is delicately indicated, copies from the paintings of Christian subjects acquired by Akbar and inherited by Jahangir, who actively collected more. The halo then began to be used in depictions of the royal family, a convention borrowed (with many others) by the Rajputs".

¹ <http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/6980/9856/9934/12386>

² Topsfield, A. and Beach, M.C. (1992) *Indian Paintings and Drawings from the collection of Howard Hodgkin*. London, Thames and Hudson

³ Stronge, S. in Guy, J. and Swallow, D. (eds) (1990) *Arts of India 1550 – 1900*. London: V&A Publications