

Seeing Eye-To-Eye with Mughal Miniatures: Some Observations on the Outward Gazing Figure in Mughal Art

By Gregory Minissale

Sometimes, when we view the face of a figure portrayed in Mughal painting, it appears to stare right back at us. This figure may be an attendant, courtier or soldier who appears to stare out from the represented space of the picture to meet the gaze of the viewer, eye-to-eye. The outward gazing figure appears to acknowledge or question the presence of the viewer, and to draw him or her into the action. The outward gazing figure is a sophisticated artistic device that occurs systematically in Mughal painting from the late Akbar period (regnal dates 1556-1605) to the reign of Shah Jahan I (1628-1657). The outward gazing figure appears rarely in Persian painting contemporary with Mughal painting until the eighteenth century Qajar period, and so the device cannot have been learnt from Persian painting.

Perhaps the earliest appearance of this figure in Mughal art is in a folio in the *Hamza-nama* (1562-77) of a man staring into a room through a window at the viewer.¹ In the British Library *Darab-nama* (1580-85), an illustrated manuscript telling the story of Darab, in Muslim tradition the father of Alexander the Great, Darab is shown in one of the illustrations uprooting a tree and he appears to stare out of picture as he does so.² In the Bankipore *Timur-nama* (1584-86), a history of Timur or Tamerlane, there are no less than 12 faces staring out at us³ and a few years later, similar figures may be seen in the Victoria and Albert Museum *Akbar-nama*, c.1589-90 (the history of the Emperor Akbar's reign).⁴ The outward gazing figure also appears in the great illustrated histories of the Akbar period: in at least six pages of the *Chingiz Khan-nama* (1596), the history of the Mongols, for example⁵ and in various other manuscripts discussed below.

The more systematic use of the outward gazing figure in Mughal painting from the late 1580s coincides with the increasing exposure of Mughal artists to European portrait painting. What further strengthens the case that the more complex or sophisticated use of the outward gazing figure was encouraged by European examples are Mughal copies of European engravings, some of which feature the outward gazing figure prominently. There are no fewer than five faces peering out at us in a Mughal album leaf of the *Crucifixion* c. 1590.⁶ The composition has two groups on either side of the main scene on the left are the men, on the right, a group of women attends Mary who has fainted. Women to the right of her and behind her appear to stare out of the picture. In the group on the right are three men peering out to form a triangular composition in the crowd. The outward gazing figures here come as some surprise to the viewer who examines this painting in detail. Not only do they suggest a curious mood of tranquil observation in groups of figures that are largely unaware of any reality outside of their grief, they mirror the viewer's quiet inspection of the painting and increase the illusion of communication and intimacy with the figures portrayed. They appear to observe us, as we

observe them. In another example of a Mughal copy of a European engraving by Jan Sadeler, St. Peter throws a disarming glance at the viewer as if to challenge the beholder to contemplate his saintliness.⁷ In a picture clearly indebted to a European print of a woman with an old man by the artist Basawan, c. 1590, a man, possibly one of the evangelists, is fully absorbed reading a book while a young woman, a figure of inspiration is pictured staring out with a knowing smile, appearing to be aware of the viewer's gaze.⁸

It is probable that only one or two examples of European art showing the use of the outward gazing figure would have been enough to encourage Mughal artists to devise new and exciting ways to use the device in their own art. Although the reasoning behind its use in European art is well documented, in Mughal art no written description of its use is extant in Mughal historical documents. But it is worth trying to understand some of the writing justifying its use in contemporary Europe, not only because some Mughal artists appeared to use the outward gazing figure for the kind of psychological effects pursued by their European counterparts but also because comparing the use of the outward gazing figure in European painting with the Mughal draws out some interesting parallels and differences between the two traditions. In Western art, the figure that appears to stare out directly from the picture space to meet the gaze of the viewer has been called a *festaiuolo* (or *compère*), a term used for a device found in fifteenth-century Italian painting. This device was used also in later Northern European prints, the kind that the Jesuits brought with them to the Mughal court in the late sixteenth century in order to explain Christian doctrines. The *festaiuolo* is based on a character in Italian theatre whose role was to urge the audience on by addressing it directly. The aim was to encourage the audience to become more "involved" in the play:

The plays were introduced by a choric figure, the *festaiuolo*, often in the character of an angel who remained on the stage during the action of the play as a mediator between the beholder and the events portrayed: similar choric figures catching our eyes and pointing to the central action, are often used by the painters.⁹

The use of the *festaiuolo* was highly recommended by Alberti in his *Treatise on Painting*:

I like there to be a figure, which admonishes and instructs us about what is happening in the picture¹⁰

Thus, the purpose of this figure in both theatre and painting was to act as a mediator between audience and actors, or, in painting between the viewer and the image. In Mughal art, such a figure is used mainly as a device to indicate and instruct the viewer to focus on the essential aspects of the visual narrative and thereby to increase the viewer's intellectual and emotional response to the picture. The use of the *festaiuolo* shows us that the Mughals had a heightened sensitivity to the dynamics involved in viewing pictures and aimed to create a psychological interplay between the viewer and the event or person depicted in the painting.

The polar opposite of the engagement with the eyes is the disfigurement of representation in both European and Islamic cultures. In Mughal art, a well-known example is from the *Hamza-nama*, where in a representation of idols their faces have been rubbed out.¹¹ The slashing with knives of representations of nudes or the blanking out of faces of represented figures in Islamic manuscripts provides further evidence of the 'investiture with life' as the basis for response.

What would the danger be of leaving it whole if it were simply dead to begin with? It would be easy to answer by claiming that the fear is that the representation is suggestive...it may be but the imagination that lingers is the imagination that reconstitutes, and reconstitution is constantly referred back to the

representation and projected into it, so that the mind not only sees the mental image but strives toward materiality and the investment with life.¹²

The striking out of the eyes is particularly consistent cross-culturally. The magical allure of pictures may be due to the captivating power of the gaze but the belief in the apotropaic and talismanic powers of a painting, and the belief in the “evil eye” may help to explain acts of disfigurement. Such a violent act obviously does nothing of the kind; in fact, it powerfully underlines and expresses the belief of the iconoclast in the supernatural power of the image. A large majority of assaults on images are predicated in one way or another on the attribution of life to the figure represented. Iconoclasts fear this reaction in others as a transference of their own empirical, experiential base.

...hence so very frequently the destruction of the eyes. These are the clearest and most obvious indication of the vitality of the represented figure. The livelier the eyes seem, the livelier the body. Take away the eyes and remove the signs of life.¹³

The gaze is a complex device composed of the gaze of the viewer and the “gaze” of the figure portrayed in the picture (the outward viewing figure). The gaze can conjure up a range of responses in the viewer from a feeling of voyeurism, self-awareness, or curiosity but also significantly, the power of the gaze (and by implication, its representation) engages the viewer in the visual play of the illusion of the figure’s animation.

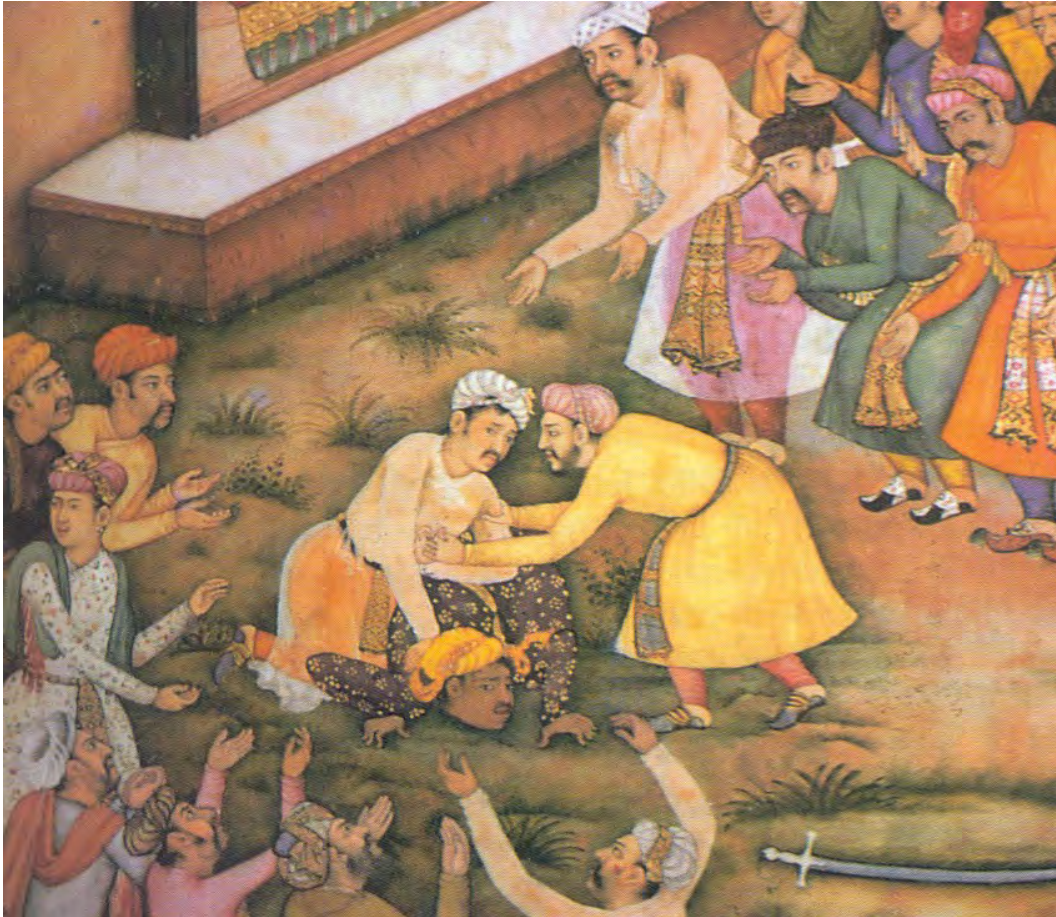
The outward gazing figure appears to peer through time and space at the viewer making the painting a transparent vehicle for that gaze. The viewer can also be led by this illusion to imagine that he or she can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it momentarily credible that we are part of the painting’s visible world, yet it is part of the visual play encouraged by the outward gazing figure for the viewer to feel that he or she is returning that gaze. If we accept that we can see a distant hill, we propose that from that hill we can be seen. In a sense, the reciprocal nature of vision may be seen as a form of dialogue.¹⁴ In painting, the effect of the outward gazing figure is above all paradoxical. The gaze captures the attention of the viewer and increases self-consciousness. Thus, the dual aspect to the *festaiuolo* engenders viewer involvement and awareness of that involvement.

The illusion that the painted figure’s gaze penetrates the viewer’s space arrests the process of inspecting a painting, perhaps because of the fleeting illusion, which one has to check, that someone in the picture is looking at us. The outward gazing figures

...are *advertent*, fully aware of the presence of an unseen witness towards whom they direct their physical stances.¹⁵

A particularly striking example of the outward gazing figure in the Akbar period is of the Emperor Akbar himself fighting with Raja Man Singh in a folio of the Chester Beatty Library *Akbar-nama* c. 1604 (Figure 1, detail). Both combatants appear to glare at the viewer from the representational picture space in order to sharpen the impact of the violence, and to fix the beholder’s attention on this particular area of the painting; otherwise, the viewer may skip over the faces, failing to identify them. In such a case, the outward gazing figure is used to foil “simultaneous”, as opposed to “consecutive” vision. Simultaneous vision is a general scanning of the composition. In this situation, the eye takes a snapshot of the general appearance of the painting. Consecutive vision is the opposite of this, where the eye settles on a particular detail for some time to move on to another detail, and so on. The *festaiuolo* figure encourages the

latter kind of eye movement, and thus acts as an arresting focal point. When the gaze of the viewer meets that of the outward gazing figure it reflects back, causing the viewer to reconsider, perhaps even re-trace, the flowing movement of viewing. The outward gazing figure “catches our eye”, reciprocates, reflects back.



1. The Emperor Akbar fighting with Raja Man Singh in a folio of the Chester Beatty Library *Akbar-nama* c. 1604, Ms. 3, folio 169r.

Using the outward figure to draw attention to the identity of a figure is a device used also in the Jahangir period in the picture of *Jahangir on the Hourglass Throne* (or *Jahangir preferring the presence of a sufi Shaykh to kings*)¹⁶ where one of the important personages shown in a subordinate position to the Emperor is James I of England. In *The Presentation of a Book by Sa'di*, an imaginary painting by Abu'l Hasan c. 1616, famous men from different periods are shown in a procession.¹⁷ Amongst a number of Shaykhs is the famous poet Sa'di (1213-19-1292), an Ottoman Sultan (possibly Beyazid 1389-1403) and an unknown Safavid Shah (possibly Shah Tahmasp (1524-76) in a procession. The right hand side of this picture is missing but was most probably a painting of Jahangir receiving homage from these important foreign kings and Shaykhs (as he does in *Jahangir on the Hourglass Throne*). The Safavid Shah is a focal point in the picture because of his frank outward gaze, impressing on the viewer that these are no ordinary visitors.



2. The execution of the rebel Khan Jahan Lodi Folio 94B, *Padshah-nama*, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, RL OMS 1618

In the Shah Jahan *Padshah-nama* the outward gazing figure is also used to draw attention to the identity of a particular figure. One painting portrays the summary execution of the rebel Khan Jahan Lodi in a gruesome scene of decapitation (Figure 2).¹⁸ Dominating the central area of the picture, however, is an outward gazing figure who obviously has a part to play in these events, as he is shown with his hands held up in surprise, being arrested by three soldiers with lances. This has to be Farid, mentioned in the text as one of Khan Jahan Lodi's sons who was captured alive. Such identification is made easier as the figure peers out to meet the viewer's gaze as if to ask for pity. Other outward gazing figures on the horizon serve as witnesses of the execution. It is the pathetic and piercing gaze of Farid, at the centre of the painting however, that impresses us with the feeling of the inescapable destiny of those who choose to cross the Emperor's path. Other relationships of shared gazes mark symmetry and geometrical order.

One of the most important Mughal illustrated manuscripts that uses the device of the outward gazing figure frequently is the Emperor Akbar's *Khamsa* of Nizami, 1593-95, now in the British Library.

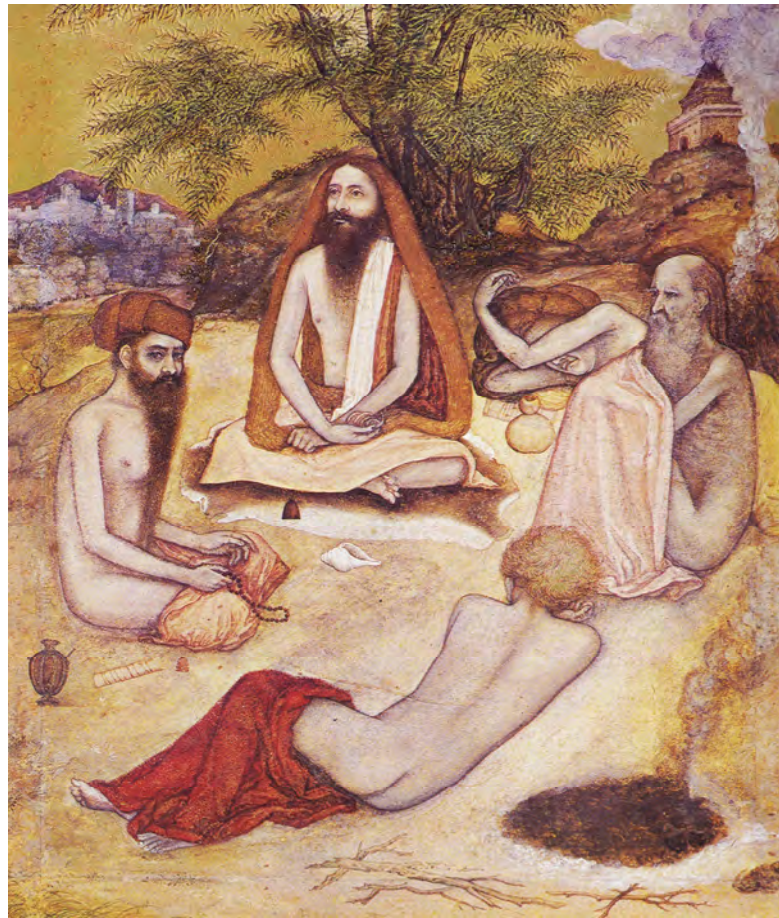


3. Shapur bringing Khusrau news of Shirin, f. 52a, from the Emperor Akbar's *Khamsa* of Nizami, British Library, Or. 12,208.

None of the outward gazing figures here are portraits, which shows that this device was used on occasion for reasons other than drawing attention to the identity of the figure, as in portraits. Here, the outward gazing figure is usually part of a group but is distinguished from the others by virtue of its direct gaze 'out of the picture' at the viewer.¹⁹ In a miniature depicting Shapur bringing Khusrau news of Shirin²⁰ (Figure 3), the artist sets the main figure apart from the rest of the action by enclosing him into a squared off area that appears to be a picture within a picture. The privacy of this internal enclosure, emphasized by the tent wall excluding all of Khusrau's subjects, intensifies the intimacy of the encounter. Khusrau leans forward to hear the news of the woman he loves, relayed to him by the excited messenger Shapur, and glances out of his cloistered space. The gaze accentuates the immediacy and impact of the scene, as well as the importance of the news, creating a rapport with the viewer, in a way that Khusrau staring directly at Shapur may not have done.²¹

Later Mughal painting develops the device of the outward gazing figure in rather more sophisticated ways. This may be seen in a picture of Hindu holy men c. 1625, now in a private collection and attributed to Govardhan (Figure 4). It depicts a circle of mystics and the viewer's attention is immediately fixed by the seated ascetic on the left who, with a piercing gaze, calmly appears to acknowledge the presence of the viewer. To the right is his polar

opposite, an ascetic lying on the floor with his arm covering his eyes. This contrast represents a series of opposites: “seeing” and “not-seeing”; awareness and ignorance (of the viewer), and revelation and concealment.



4. Hindu holy men c. 1625, Private Collection, attributed to Govardhan.

The holy man at the centre appears to stare out of the pictorial space altogether contemplating on a fixed point of the visible world, of which he may have lost awareness, in favour of some inner vision. The duality of seeing and not seeing is thus subtly interspersed with one who sees (“thinks”) and yet stares into the distance, this seeing beyond the visible world is known as the *chashm-i barzakhi*, the eye on the world beyond. Another seated holy man on the right hand side is focussed on a point outside of the picture space which we cannot see. The viewer can see four main points of the composition as a square on its side. Each point is a different “way of seeing” or not seeing. The viewer becomes a seeker after meaning, much like the mystics themselves in the decipherment of these different ways of seeing. The outward gazing figure causes a process of reflexivity. Far more complex in the picture however, is the contrast between the knowing gaze, one of the main focal points of the painting and the unknowing body. The gaze of the figure “disembodies” the eye of the viewer. The engagement of eye-to-eye contact defers all consideration of the body, pictorially and from outside the picture in the viewer’s space. One disembodied eye views the other disembodied eye across the illusionary pictorial space. This is entirely appropriate for a painting that ostensibly aims to show the

indifference of the holy man to matters of the flesh and to encourage an understanding of this in the viewer.

The outward gazing figure was an essential tool for empowering the Mughal artist in his quest to direct the gaze of the viewer in order to help structure the message of a painting. But it also reflects a number of attitudes attached to the power of the gaze, magical, superstitious or otherwise. In the Akbar period, even though the device of painting the direct gaze was most probably given added vigour from the example of the *festaiuolo* in European prints, it is incorporated into the Mughal visual language of gestures for various effects: reflection on the intricacies of the text, for emphasis, a pointer, to lead the eye to other parts of the composition or to interrupt or arrest the gaze of the viewer and most often as way to signify a portrait, the outward gazing figure challenges the viewer to identify him or her. The use of the outward gazing figure reflects the Mughal artists' increasing awareness of how to engage with the viewer's eye movements in order to enhance understanding of the visual narrative action, to "catch the eye". In the Jahangir and Shah Jahan periods, the outward gazing figure continued to be used as a formal device to guide the eye and as way of drawing attention to the identity of the outward gazing figure itself. Often placed on the thresholds of pictures, the outward gazing figure is also used to demarcate outer and inner pictorial space by bringing to the attention of the viewer the idea of the threshold, often guarded by the outward gazing figure.²² It is remarkable that in its more sophisticated form, the pictorial device of the outward gazing figure in paintings of the seventeenth century, and in the margins of paintings in albums, increases the viewer's involvement with and interest in pictorial complexity by mimicking the viewer's gaze and reflecting it back. The viewer has simply never been addressed in this manner before in any consistent way in Islamic art. The outward gazing figure marks a new cognitive development in Mughal painting, an illusionary but nevertheless reflexive action that reverses the direction of the gaze of the viewer appearing momentarily to turn him or her from viewing subject into the object of the gaze.

¹ Now in the MAK-Austrian Museum of Applied Arts/Contemporary Art, Vienna, B. I. 8770/35. Published by John Seyller, Ebba Koch and Wheeler Thackston, *The Adventures of Hamza, Painting and Storytelling in Mughal India* (Washington, DC: Freer Gallery of Art: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; London: Azimuth Editions, 2002), pl. 35.

² British Library, Or. 4615, f. 100v. Published by Philippa Vaughan, 'Miskin', in Pratapaditya Pal, ed., *Master Artists of the Imperial Mughal Court* (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1991), fig. 1, p. 19.

³ Oriental Public Library, Bankipore, Patna, f.123b. Unpublished.

⁴ IS. 2. 1896.112/117. See A. K. Das, 'Mansur' in P. Pal, ed., *Master Artists*, Fig. 1, p. 41. For the dating of this manuscript see J. Seyller, "Codicological aspects of the Victoria and Albert Museum *Akbar-nama* and historical implications" *Art Journal*, vol. 49, no. 4, Winter (1990), p. 379-387.

⁵ See H. Knížková and J. Marek, *The Jengiz Khan Miniatures from the Court of Akbar the Great* (London: Spring Books, 1963), pl. 4, a man with raised hand, centre left; pl. 5a, a man staring out at us while slaughtering a horse; pl. 13, a man just under the strip of text at the top of the illustration; pl. 15a, courtiers to the left of the scene; pl. 23b, more courtiers to left; pl. 32 a fellow with his hair being pulled and another brandishing a sword, centre foreground.

⁶ British Museum 1983. 10-15. I

⁷ Gulshan Album, Gulistan Palace, Tehran, c.1600 published by Asok Kumar Das, *Mughal Painting During Jahangir's Time* (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1978), pl. 70.

⁸ Musée Guimet, Paris, No. 3619. Published by Amina Okada, *Imperial Mughal Painters, Indian Miniatures from the 16th and 17th Centuries* tr. D. Dusinberre (Paris: Flammarion, 1992), pl. 89.

⁹ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 72.

¹⁰ M. Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, p. 72.

¹¹ Victoria and Albert Museum, London, I. S. 1509-1883. Published by John Seyller, Ebba Koch and Wheeler Thackston, *The Adventures of Hamza*, pl. 23.

¹² David Freedberg, *The Power of Images. Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 420.

¹³ Freedberg, *Power of the Image*, p. 415.

¹⁴ This also has the dimension of gender and power added to it. "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight." John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 47. Unfortunately, Berger did not extend his analysis to include the cognitive operations involved in women looking at women or men looking at men.

¹⁵ A reference to Raphael's *Marriage of the Virgin*, Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting, The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983). p. 111.

¹⁶ Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institute Washington D. C. Inv. 42.15B. Published in Richard Ettinghausen, 'The Emperor's Choice', *De Artibus Opuscula XL* (New York: 1961), fig. 1.

¹⁷ Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, W. 668, f. 37, published in Ettinghausen, 'The Emperor's Choice', *De Artibus Opuscula XL*, fig. 2.

¹⁸ Folio 94B, Royal Library, Windsor Castle, RL OMS 1618.

¹⁹ The outward gazing figure features frequently in scenes of crowds. Many pictures of crowd scenes are divided into male and female sides, reflecting the attitude that women and men jostled together is inappropriate. In such compositions, there may also be male and a female outward gazing figure placed on either side. Either Mughal artists had an innate sense of symmetry, or they were aware their outward gazing figures should appeal to women as well as men. Such segregation of the sexes (and balancing male with female outward gazing figures) is also seen in *Krishna Lifts Mount Govardhan* from a manuscript of the Genealogy of Hari or the *Harivamsa* c. 1585-90, Metropolitan Museum of Art 28.63, published by Stuart Cary Welch, *Imperial Mughal Painting* (New York: G. Braziller, 1978), pl. 10. Here Krishna performs his superhuman feat appearing to divide the whole scene by lifting the great mountain and creating a horizontal line across the picture. He also stands at the centre creating two groups, men on the left, women on the right. Amongst the men, a figure with a tall turban and a matchlock over his shoulder appears to confer quietly with another man behind a screen of leaves. He pointedly stares out at the viewer. The function of such a figure in this context must be to show the outward gazing figure as a witness of the scene and as a potential storyteller, able to transmit an oral history focusing on the episode. On the right, a woman props up her chin in a cupped hand wearing a frank expression of bemusement, which she appears to want to share with the viewer. Many of the expressions worn by these outward gazing figures reflect a growing awareness of the power of depicting facial expressions to convey emotions that are to be associated with the main narrative events portrayed in these illustrations.

²⁰ For a reproduction of the full painting, see Barbara Brend, *The Emperor Akbar's Khamsa of Nizami* (London: British Library, 1995), fig. 6.

²¹ See also in the British Library *Khamsa Shirin Kills Herself at Khusrau's Tomb*, fig. 14; *The Battle of the Clans*, fig. 18. The emotional impact of both scenes is increased by the details of figures peering out almost appearing to beseech the viewer increasing the illusion of immediacy or danger. In the same manuscript, the outward gazing figure is used two more times by Mukund, both times for emphasis, once in f. 184b to draw the viewer's attention to the empty throne of Iran, shortly to be occupied by Bahram Gur (Brend, fig. 23); and secondly by an onlooker in the painting of the Qipchaq women who clearly expects us to be similarly impressed with the events unfolding before him or her regarding the talisman and the Qipchaq women f. 266b (Brend, *The Emperor Akbar's Khamsa of Nizami* fig. 35). The talisman created to magically force the Qipchaq women to veil themselves also gazes out from the picture space, and the artist has playfully painted her with a transfixed gaze as if its power as talisman would similarly enchant the viewer.

²² See a painting of a young prince with sages in a garden by Bichitr, Chester Beatty Library, Ms. 7, no. 7, a reproduction of the full painting may be seen in Okada, *Imperial Mughal Painters*, fig. 209. In the bottom left corner of the picture an outward gazing figure, a guardsman with a shield, appears to encounter the viewer and to guard the way to the internal courtyard where sages are gathered to discuss poetry or theology with the prince.