

Short notice

Reflections on a Miniature Painting with ‘Deccan Ruler’

• JOS GOMMANS* •

‘Each perspective throws a certain light upon the situation,
but none of them can be final or definitive.’

WILLIAM CHITTICK ON IBN ARABI (1165-1240)¹

In its collection of Asian art, the Rijksmuseum holds a miniature painting, as enigmatic as it is unique, from the Deccan region in central India (fig. 1). In the centre, we see a prince – according to the museum’s online catalogue, a ‘Deccan ruler’ – sitting on the floor of an elevated terrace at the water’s edge, in the company of two other persons.² The person on the right waves a fan of peacock feathers, while the figure on the left is showing some kind of object to the prince. Right of the prince stands a small child, seemingly tugging on his sleeve. Surmounting a canopy with five domes is a field containing an Arabic inscription, flanked on either side by floral images. The inscription is a mirrored text fragment (here indicated in italics) from the Quran (Surah 5:112-114):

[112] Jesus, son of Mary, said the disciples, can Allah send down to us from heaven a table spread with food? He replied: Have fear of Allah, if you are *true believers*. [113] *We wish to eat of it, they said, so that we may reassure our heart and know that what you said to us is true, and that we may be witnesses of it.*

< Fig. 1
ANONYMOUS,
A Deccan Ruler,
The Deccan region,
c. 1650-99.
Body colour and gold
on paper, 158 x 134 mm
(representation),
333 x 216 mm (sheet).
Amsterdam, Rijks-
museum, inv. no.
RP-T-1895-A-3066.

pages 340-341

Fig. 2
Entire painting, seen
through the verso
side. The difference
in paper thickness
between the field with
the Arabic text and
the rest of the paint-
ing is noteworthy.

Fig. 3
X-ray image, seen from
the recto side, show-
ing the grid formed by
the overlapping of the
(at least) two layers
of paper, specifically
along the flower motifs
surrounding the
miniature painting.

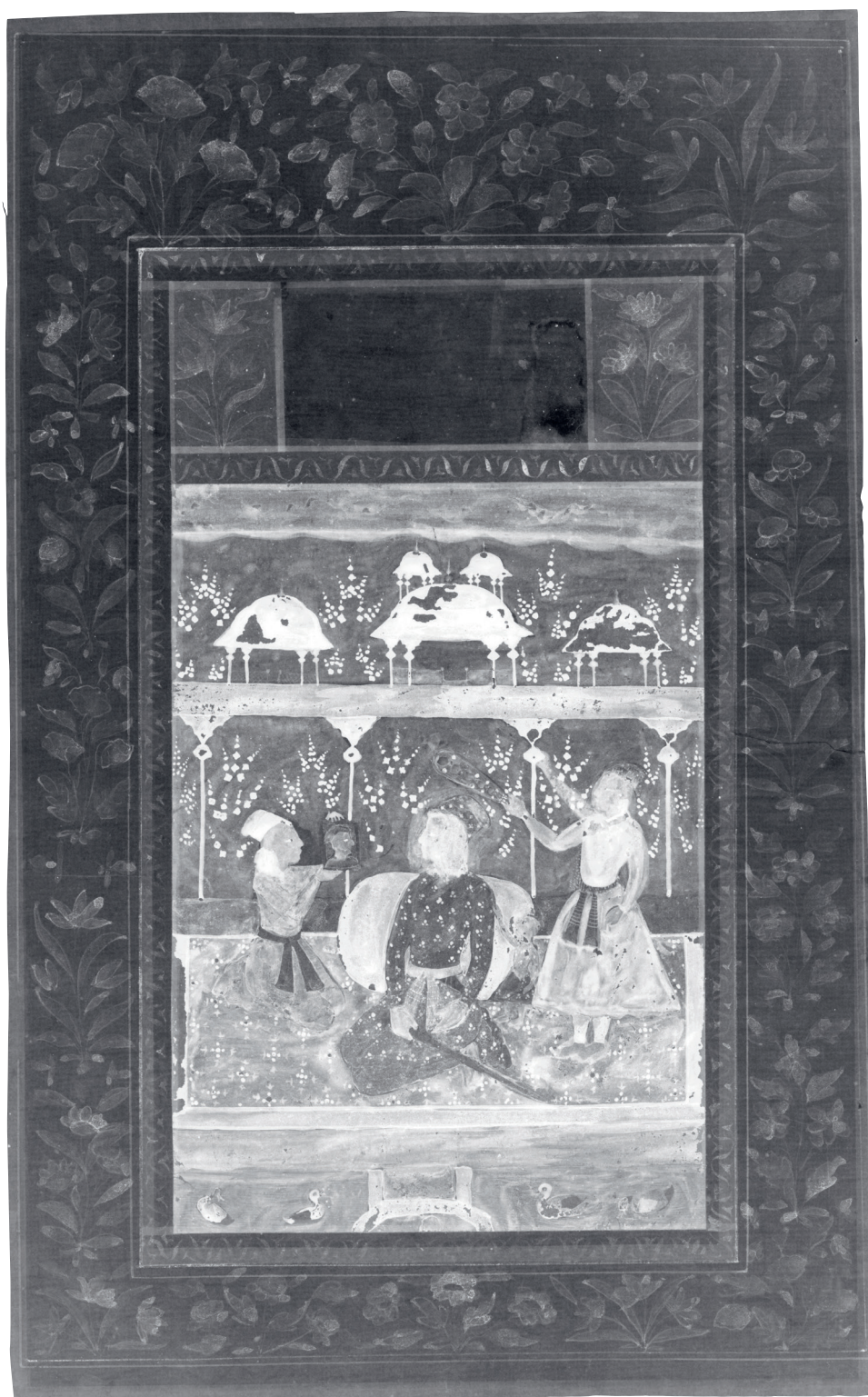
[114] *Lord, said Jesus, the son of Mary, send to us from heaven a table spread with food, that it may mark a feast for us and for those that will come after us: a sign from you. Give us our sustenance; You are the best Giver.*³

How are we to interpret this enigmatic miniature painting? To do so, several key questions must be addressed: Where and when was the painting made? Who is the character in the main image? What is the meaning of the combination of this depiction and the Quranic text fragment? Although there are no definitive answers, reflecting on these inquiries may possibly give us insight into the complex visual language of this remarkable painting.

Structure of the Painting

The painting’s structure is relevant to its interpretation. An initial survey using a microscope and a light box reveals it is composed of at least two layers of paper glued together (fig. 2).⁴ The presence of chain and laid lines and watermarks indicate the use of Western paper. X-ray imaging failed to provide additional insight into the actual





watermarks (fig. 3). However, transmitted light images show what could possibly be an animal shape in the bottom left corner, above it a mark in the form of what appears to be a ladder or grid, and bottom centre a flower-shaped mark.⁵ The ladder or grid could also be the result of the multiple chain and laid line structures of the paper layers on top of each other (figs. 4a-c). The verso side of this composite sheet is heavily polished, reflecting a treatment common in parts of Asia. On the recto side, the outermost floral decoration has been applied in gold paint. The remaining elements – the four inner borders, the main image, the top border above it, and the two floral decorations left and right of the text – have been pasted onto this layered sheet of paper. The space containing the Arabic text was previously

occupied by another piece of paper. At some point, this piece was removed, to be concluded from the edges still present along the top, bottom and left sides, as well as the fibrous texture of the re-liberated surface of the underlying paper. Presumably, this action resulted in damage to the surface, leaving a hole that was later repaired with paper pulp. Because the handwritten Arabic letters of the inscription appear to continue uninterrupted, flowing naturally over the remaining edges, we may conclude that the text was probably added after the missing paper had been removed (fig. 5).

Localization, Dating and Inscription

These initial material findings provide no definitive insight regarding where and when the object was made. According to the name and description provided by the Rijksmuseum, it originates from the Deccan and was made in the second half of the seventeenth century.⁶ This origin and dating are confirmed by Malini Roy, a Mughal painting expert, who posits that the knee-length *jama* with red floral motif worn by the central figure specifically points to the western Deccan sultanate of Bijapur (1489-1686), where such dress was in fashion during the reign of Ali Adil Shah (r. 1656-72).⁷ Indeed, the layered structure of the painting's composition and the style of the flowering trees confirm a Deccani origin.

Inscribed on the painting's verso is a text written in Old Dutch script, ostensibly from the seventeenth century. It is conceivable that this text was added in the second half of that century, when an interest in Indian miniature paintings arose among European collectors. These works commonly entered the Dutch Republic via the trading posts of the Dutch East India Company (voc).⁸ Golkonda, capital of the eponymous sultanate east of Bijapur, was an important trading centre for these kinds of paintings.

Figs. 4a-c
Transmitted light images, viewing the verso side of *A Deccan Ruler* (fig. 1), showing what might be watermarks in the various layers of the painting, turned upside down to facilitate their identification as: an animal shape (a), a ladder or grid shape (b) and a flower shape (c).



4a



4b



4c



In the case of the present painting, the buying and selling of materials in this city would also explain the use of Western paper. According to Roy, the inscription (fig. 6) reads: 'd'odientje siet plaet vand' koningh van hondestan'.⁹ It provides clues with respect to the identity of the central figure in the painting, depending on how we read its wording. In any case,

a Muslim ruler must be sought (fig. 7). The posited identification in the Rijksmuseum catalogue, suggesting that the central figure could be the Hindu Maratha prince Shambhuji (r. 1681-89) can be rejected outright, if only for the reason that he wears his *jama* clockwise. This rules out any possibility that he is a Hindu and confirms his identity as a Muslim.¹⁰

Fig. 5
The field with the Arabic text. Remnants of the removed paper can be discerned at the top, on the left and along the bottom. The hole filled in with pulp can be seen on the right.

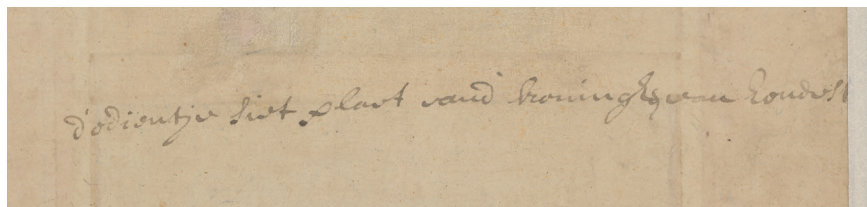


Fig. 6
The Dutch-language inscription on the verso side of fig. 1.

Shah Jahan?

If the first word 'd'odientje' of the Dutch-language inscription is to be read as *audiëntie*, the Dutch word for audience, as Roy purports, then reference is being made to the three depicted onlookers in the scene – not just the central figure, but all those present – looking at a portrait (*plaat*) of another ruler. Given the striking resemblance between the main figure and the person in the picture, the latter can only be a portrait of the seated figure himself, or more likely, also given the similarity of the costume, a mirror showing his own reflection. When we combine this insight with the remaining words of the inscription, the central figure then becomes the subject, thus making him 'the king of Hindustan'. During the period in question, 'Hindustan' was a name that could be used for the entire Indian subcontinent, which then consisted of several polities. By far the largest of these was the Mughal Empire in the north, which in the course of the second half of the seventeenth century also encompassed the Deccan. Accordingly, if there was one ruler who might be called *the* king of Hindustan, then this was the Mughal emperor; though also possible is that a king of Hindustan is implied.¹¹

If the hand-held object is indeed a mirror – not a picture or portrait – then this means its identification in the Dutch inscription is incorrect, making the task of interpreting the remaining words more precarious. It is even conceivable that the creator of the Dutch-language inscription also struggled with the meaning of the image shown to him or her. For the discussion at hand, however, we will assume the rest of the inscription is factually true. Therefore, presuming for a moment that the main figure is in fact *the* Mughal 'king of Hindustan', based on the depicted physical characteristics, we quickly arrive at Emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628–58), of whom



Fig. 7
Central figure in the
painting (detail fig. 1).

indeed several images are known appearing together with one of his sons (seated) in a family circle (fig. 8).¹² Shah Jahan is generally recognizable by his short but full, dark beard, and in most cases, sideburns with a characteristic curl. Given the esoteric-heretical nature of the miniature painting – i.e. the mirroring of the Quranic verse, to be discussed later – it is less likely that the person in question was a more orthodox ruler such as Shah Jahan's son Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707), the emperor who actually conquered the Deccan in the sixteen eighties. The painting is far more reminiscent of the world of one of Shah Jahan's other sons, Dara Shukoh (1615–1659), who evolved into a true philosopher-prince, and much like his great-grandfather Akbar (r. 1556–1605), drew inspiration from other religious traditions.

We know that Prince Dara used Quranic verses to validate the inclusion of Hindus.¹³ A Persian inscription accompanying a portrait of Shah Jahan's father, Jahangir (r. 1605-27), sold at Sotheby's in 1995, speaks volumes of this practice of Mughal emperors: 'when he sees his lustrous likeness, it is as if the excellent king is looking at a mirror ... whoever sees his image becomes an image worshipper.'¹⁴ If indeed Shah Jahan and Dara are the persons appearing in the present image, given the lesser refinement of the South Indian painting style – with the unbalanced lines of the buildings in the background and a watered-down impression of the colour palette – the present painting is then likely to be either a later Deccani representation of a North Indian Mughal theme or a Deccani copy of a Mughal original.

Or possibly Muhammad Adil Shah?

A better reading of the first word in the inscription might be 'odilstje', possibly referring to one of the sultans of the Adil Shah dynasty of Bijapur. Prior to its subsumption in the Mughal Empire in 1686, this was an independent sultanate in the Deccan. Given that the two auxiliary figures in the scene are clearly servants, it seems more likely that reference is not being made to the group as a whole, in the sense of an audience, but rather to the central figure by name. Similar images also typically centre on a (ruling) prince. In any case, this interpretation offers consistency in terms of the Deccani style and the subject matter of the depiction.

If the Adil Shah reference is correct, we can choose from among the rulers depicted in a miniature portrait painting of the entire dynasty from around 1680. Seated left of the dynasty's founder, Yusuf Adil Shah (r. 1490-1510), are the rulers (from left to right): Ismail Adil Shah (r. 1510-34), Ibrahim Adil Shah I (r. 1535-58), and Ali Adil Shah I (r. 1558-80); seated right are (from left to right): Ibrahim Adil Shah II (r. 1580-1627), Muhammad Adil Shah (r. 1627-56), Ali Adil Shah II (r. 1656-72) and Sikandar Adil Shah (r. 1672-86) (figs. 9, 10).¹⁵ Based solely on physical characteristics and a comparison with other portraits of these rulers, Muhammad Adil Shah emerges as the ruler most likely to be the protagonist in the Rijksmuseum image, this despite Roy's association of the garment with his son Ali.¹⁶ Besides similar physical characteristics such as the facial features and beard growth, there is also a characteristic curl in the sideburns; of the Adil Shah rulers, only Muhammad is depicted with this detail (fig. 11).¹⁷ The fact that this ruler's reign coincides with the Dutch presence in his empire – the Dutch East India Company (voc) maintained a trading post in Bijapur on the western coast at Vengurla from 1637 to 1673 – further

Fig. 8
ANONYMOUS,
*Khurram (Shah
Jahan) with son Dara
Shukoh, Princes of
the Mughal Empire,*
Mughal Empire,
c. 1620. Body colour
and gold on paper,
190 x 136 mm.
London, Victoria
and Albert Museum,
inv. no. 15 90-1965
(verso).





Fig. 9

ANONYMOUS,
*The House of Adil
Shah of Bijapur*,
Bijapur, c. 1680.
Ink, body colour
gold and silver on
paper; 413 x 325 mm.
New York, The
Metropolitan
Museum of Art,
inv. no. 1982.213.
Purchase, Gifts in
memory of Richard
Ettinghausen;
Schimmel Foundation
Inc., Ehsan Yarshater,
Karekin Beshir Ltd.,
Margaret Mushekian,
Mr. and Mrs. Edward
Ablat and Mr. and
Mrs. Jerome A. Straka
Gifts; The Friends of
the Islamic Depart-
ment Fund; Gifts
of Mrs. A. Lincoln
Scott and George

Blumenthal,
Bequests of Florence
L. Goldmark, Charles
R. Gerthand Millie
Bruhl Frederick,
and funds from
various donors,
by exchange; Louis
E. and Theresa S.
Seley Purchase
Fund for Islamic
Art and Rogers
Fund, 1982.



Fig. 10

Second from the left:
*Sultan Muhammad
Adil Shah of Bijapur*
(detail fig. 9).



Fig. 11
ANONYMOUS,
*Portrait of Sultan
Muhammad Adil Shah*,
Golkonda, c. 1686.
Body colour and
gold on paper,
203 x 140 mm.
Sheet 40 in the
Witsen Album
with forty-nine East
Indian miniature
paintings of princes.
Amsterdam, Rijks-
museum, inv. no.
RP-T-00-3186-40
(detail).



Fig. 12
ANONYMOUS,
*Portrait of Sultan
Muhammad Adil Shah*,
Golkonda, c. 1685.
Body colour on
paper, 114 x 86 mm
(representation),
120 x 95 mm (sheet).
Amsterdam, Rijks-
museum, inv. no.
RP-T-1995-25.

supports this attribution, given that a Dutch-language inscription was most likely already added to this miniature in the seventeenth century.

This interpretation of the Rijksmuseum painting, however, raises a new question: who is the child standing next to the sultan? Deccan historian Gijs Kruijtzer points out that Muhammad is presumed to have been lighter in complexion than his son and successor, Ali. At the time, rumours prevailed claiming that Ali was not Muhammad's son but instead the child of his wife Bari Sahib and an elephant handler (*mahout*). In official court circles, however, it was maintained that Ali was by all means the natural son of Muhammad and one of his mistresses, subsequently adopted by Bari Sahib.¹⁸

Another perspective on this matter is provided by a portrait of Muhammad Adil Shah acquired by the Rijksmuseum in 1995, one which incidentally shows the sultan without the sideburn curl (fig. 12). Here too, on

the painting's reverse we find an inscription written in Old Dutch. At the top, we see 'No5' and then in nastaliq script 'sultan adil shah', followed by the Dutch-language text with the approximate spelling of Adil Shah (*adilsja*), similar to what may also have been used on the reverse of the present miniature (*odilstje*):

Sultan Adil Shah; the righteous prince, who, because he was incapable of performing the necessary duties of marriage, was miserably beaten with sticks and clubs by his wife in the harem, and finally, at her command, was put to death by a kaffir named Khan-i Khanan; [This being a portrait of] the sixth of the kings of Bijapur.¹⁹

This intimate reference to the sexual problems of Muhammad is confirmed by surviving Persian and Portuguese sources concerning the prince, which state that even healing yogis were consulted, by which the prince's private matters became a public secret.²⁰

If we assume that 'odilstje' refers to a member of the Adilshahi dynasty, then it can indeed be concluded that the man depicted here is Muhammad. If so, this might be interpreted as wishful thinking on the part of the painting's maker – or possibly even the sultan himself, the yogi healer or any other individual who commissioned it – who then depicted Muhammad's son Ali with a much lighter complexion than he would have had in reality.²¹

Esoteric meaning

Irrespective of the identifications posited here, the matter of the painting's substantive meaning must still be addressed. We can only speculate about the possible relationship between the Quranic verse, in which Jesus beseeches Allah to show his apostles a sign, and the image of a ruler shown in conjunction with a mirror. In any case, the composition of the painting, whereby a verse has been inserted within the frame of an already existing image, points to a deliberate combination of word and image. The inclusion of the depicted mirror and the mirror-written Quranic verse clearly suggests a deeper, esoteric meaning that transcends the representation's sheer artistic appeal.²² In Sufism, mirrors are frequently introduced as a metaphor conveying the notion that only in its

own reflection can humanity behold the Divine. As formulated by the fourteenth-century Sufi teacher al-Qashani: 'that which is seen in the mirror of the Absolute is the form of the man who is looking'.²³ Moreover, mirror writing (*muthanna*) was a fashionable aspect of Islamic calligraphy, often employed to alert the viewer to the hidden, inner qualities of, for example, a Quranic verse. The mirror itself is therefore a metaphor for the inner soul, which, through mystical contemplation, was thought to be receptive to these qualities. For this reason, mirror writing was cherished in the occult sciences that were fairly common among practitioners at this time, certainly also at the courts of Bijapur and the Mughal Empire.²⁴ In this sense, the painting as a whole could have been used as a talisman or for incantations, or, in line with the quoted Quranic verse, as a prayer for a special favour ('a heavenly banquet') from Allah.²⁵ While there can be no doubt regarding the painting's esoteric-mystical nature, its concrete meaning may forever remain hidden from us – thus entirely attuned to the creator's occult design.

NOTES

* I am greatly indebted to the following individuals for the collaborative review of the present essay, of which the content and thereby possible imperfections are entirely mine and mine alone: Anne-Maria van Egmond (Rijksmuseum), Gijs Kruijtzter (independent historian), Lennart Bes (Leiden University), Navina Najat Haidar (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) and Said Reza Huseini (University of Cambridge).

1 William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination*, Albany 1989, p. 358.

2 See the Rijksmuseum online catalogue: <https://id.rijksmuseum.nl/200383426> (consulted 1 July 2025).

3 The English translation as given in *The Koran*, transl. N.J. Dawood (4th revised edition), Harmondsworth Middlesex 1974, pp. 399-400.

4 This research was conducted at the author's request in the Rijksmuseum in 2017 by Idelette van Leeuwen, Alexandra Nederlof and Fleur van der Woude. Additional research was carried out in 2025 by Aurora Belli, who used X-ray imaging and Transmitted Light imaging to get a clearer view of the watermarks. It was not possible to determine the painting's exact composition. I am very grateful to the Rijksmuseum and especially these individuals for their insights regarding this matter.

5 Two of the watermarks can be compared to those in the Bernstein Online Repository:

NOTES

- the animal shape might be similar to Briquet 3552/Chateaudun 1408, see <https://memory-of-paper.eu/briquet/?refnr=3552&lang=de>; the flower shape could be like ARO19D, see <https://fondazionefedrigoni.it/it/il-catalogo/ARO19D>. Thanks to Aurora Belli.
- 6 See Rijksmuseum online catalogue (note 2). On what basis the Rijksmuseum determined this localization and dating remains unclear.
 - 7 Malini Roy, *50 x India: De 50 mooiste miniaturen van het Rijksmuseum | The 50 most Beautiful Miniatures from the Rijksmuseum*, Amsterdam 2008, pp. 72-73.
 - 8 Pauline Lunsingh Scheurleer, 'Het Witsen-album: Zeventiende-eeuwse Indiase portretten op bestelling', *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 44 (1996), no. 3, pp. 167-270.
 - 9 'd'odientje siet plaet vand' koningh van hondest[an]'. The word 'hondest' appears to have been broken off at the painting's edge.
 - 10 See Rijksmuseum online catalogue (note 2). The source of this attribution by the Rijksmuseum is unknown. On this rule regarding attire, see Gijs Kruijtzter, *Xenophobia in Seventeenth-Century India*, Leiden 2009, p. 7.
 - 11 For the meaning of the term 'Hindustan', see Manam Ahmed Asif, *The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India*, Cambridge (MA) 2020, pp. 1-27.
 - 12 Supriya Gandhi, *The Emperor who Never Was: Dara Shukoh in Mughal India*, Cambridge (MA) 2020, pp. 32-37.
 - 13 Gandhi 2020 (note 12), p. 192.
 - 14 Gregory Minissale, *Images of Thought: Visuality in Islamic India, 1550-1750*, Cambridge (MA) 2009, p. 172.
 - 15 Mark Zebrowski, *Deccan Painting*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1983, p. 151.
 - 16 Muhammad Adil Shah was also portrayed by Rembrandt twice (see Stephanie Schrader (ed.), *Rembrandt and the Inspiration of India*, exh. cat. Los Angeles (J. Paul Getty Museum) 2018, p. 112). On a side note, I examined not only all the Adil Shahs of Bijapur, but also all the Qutb Shahs of Golkonda.
 - 17 See for example the portraits in Monica Juneja and Petra Kuhlmann-Hodick (eds.), *Miniatur-Geschichten: Die Sammlung indischer Malerei im Dresdner Kupferstich-Kabinet*, exh. cat. Dresden (Staatlichen Kunstsammlungen Dresden) 2017, p. 166.
 - 18 Gijs Kruijtzter, 'Bari Sahib bint Muhammad Qutb Shāh', in David Thomas and John Chesworth (eds.), *Christian-Muslim Relations: A Bibliographical History*, vol. 11: *South and East Asia, Africa and the Americas (1600-1700)*, Leiden 2017, pp. 231-34.
 - 19 'Sultaan adilsja; den regtvaardigen vorst dewelke om dat hij tot de nootzakelijke werken des huwelijx onbequaam van zijn vrouw in den harram elendig met stokken en knuppels geslagen, en eijndelijk uijt haar last door enen kaffer chan chana om 't leven gebragt is, de sesde der visiapoerse koningen.'
 - 20 Roy S. Fischel, *Local States in an Imperial World: Identity, Society and Politics in the Early Modern Deccan*, Edinburgh 2020, p. 217; Jorge Flores, *Empire of Contingency: How Portugal Entered the Indo-Persian World*, Philadelphia 2024, pp. 93-94.
 - 21 Depictions of prince with child are rare, but for a comparable image of a likewise unknown person from the first half of the seventeenth century from the Deccan region, see Navina Najar Haidar and Marika Sardar, *Sultans of Deccan India 1500-1700: Opulence and Fantasy*, exh. cat. New York (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) 2015, pp. 129-30.
 - 22 Except for the occult tradition of the *Nujūm al-'Ulūm* (manuscript in Chester Beatty Library, Dublin), the simplistic style also aligns with the poetic-musical *ragamala* illustrations in the *Kitāb-i-Nauras* produced in Bijapur. An interesting *ragamala* illustration from the neighbouring Ahmadnagar sultanate is *Ragini Pathamsika* (National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi), which shares the same composition as the present work: animals, courtly scene, balustrade, domes, text.
 - 23 Toshihiko Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*, Berkeley/Los Angeles 1984, p. 35.
 - 24 Esra Akin-Kivanç, *Muthanna/Mirror Writing in Islamic Calligraphy: History, Theory, and Aesthetics*, Bloomington 2020. For the Bijapur sultanate, see Emma J. Flatt, *The Courts of the Deccan Sultanates: Living Well in the Persian Cosmopolis*, Cambridge (MA) 2019.
 - 25 For this neo-platonic, mystical interpretation, see Jos Gommans, *The Unseen World: The Netherlands and India from 1550*, Amsterdam 2018, pp. 197-98, where I argue that the painting would have been combined with a printed Quran text. In retrospect, however, an autonomous function appears more likely. For a more specific elucidation of the esoteric meaning of the mirror, see Minissale 2009 (note 14), pp. 170-75, and Stefano Pellò, 'Portraits in the Mirror: Living Images in Nāsir 'Alī Sirhindī and Mīrzā 'Abd al-Qādir Bīdil', in Crispin Branfoot (ed.), *Portraiture in South Asia since the Mughals: Art, Representation and History*, London/New York 2018, pp. 99-125.