

**Liberal Journal of Language & Literature Review**

**Print ISSN: 3006-5887**

**Online ISSN: 3006-5895**

**<https://llrjournal.com/index.php/11>**

**PRACTICES OF MINIATURES OF ANIMALS; REIGN OF  
EMPEROR AKBAR**

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## Abstract

*Wild life has long been a fascinating phenomenon, an academic institution that always engrossed the minds of artists. This research is focusing on the wild animals, tamed or untamed, through the investigation of different aspects and features of animals and birds collectively or individually. On the basis of subsequent genres under the contemplation such as hunting scenes, animal-fights, allegorically, mythically, that depicted in miniature painting under the period of Akbar.*

### **Keywords:**

## **Introduction**

Mughal dynasty enriched with intellectual resources, opulence, precision and generosity that paved the ascendancy to the socio-cultural life of the natives. They also offer accessible transaction by adapting the indigenous traditions; even the wild life or fauna are not escape from their eyes. Emperors of Timurid dynasty were the sincere patrons of learning. All the rulers gave sustenance and essential advancement for the growth of art, architecture and literature with their rational approach. Their systematic and aestheticized ideas became the vogue of artistic traditions. Mughal School has been a vital school of art that shaped in the hub of Akbar's court. This innovative gallery served as a chamber of discussion and convention. The painting studio that established under the atelier of Akbar was a multitude house of congregation occupied with talented people that came across from all corners of propositions (editors, *The arts of the Mughal Empire*, 2025).

Mughal Dynasty was not the first Islamic dynasty ruled in India, but it is clearly considered as one of the important eras in history. Akbar was born on 23, of November 1542 at Amarkot; he passed his adolescence in the state of banishment because his father lost the kingdom that was achieved by Babur. Humayun relinquished his life after recaptured India, he extended himself as a determined leader and organized rulers among the Asiatic rulers to overcome the challenges during his early years of rule and expand the empire. Akbar (1556–1605) means “the Great” ascended the throne at the age of fourteen, without any experience that a ruler entailed, he quickly holds the kingdom with his energetic enthusiasm. He was an eager athlete and fearless and tireless rider rebound the Mughal dynasty, and established a resilient religious law by reading all religious conviction. He got married in a Rajput royal family. Jahangir, his successor, was born of a Rajput princess. He was not only a competent political ruler, but also a cosmopolitan that cultivate and polish a new synthetic and artistic idiom of art, known as Mughal painting. It was the beginning of one of the most fruitful periods in Indian history. It is worthy to remember that his reign coincides almost exactly with that of Elizabeth of England (Ballhatchet, 2026).

Apparently, Akbar was a cultured man, with attractive conduct. His complexion was rather dark, commanding countenance; bright eyes, approachable dressing sense and he looked like a king. He was moderate in diet, and consumed liquor and opium, in the same way like his ancestors. He had a credited personality, interested on innovation and improvements, a military innovator and skilled diplomat. Apart from all these activities, one of the artistic traditions that Akbar inherited the *kitabkhana* or royal workshop of his father. Over the following years, Akbar increased what his father left, by adding a large number of books. He was also partially interested in books. He never learnt, but if books read aloud to him, he took keen interest in conversations of the learned people. In short, he was an artisan, warrior, artist, armored, technologist, emperor, general, inventor, animal trainer.

### **Akbar and the Imperial Atelier**

Mughal painting was the fruit of Akbar's deeper transcendent aspiration, brought out by the cultural and social revolution. The heart of Akbar's court is the focal point of artistic and innovative cultural activities, always welcomed men of ability. The journey he took with his father from Kabul to India was a turning point, like his father he was also a follower of paintings that produce in Safavid court. His time period was also a flourishing phase of the political, cultural amalgamation of Persian, Indian, and European tradition, gathering

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Print ISSN: 3006-5887

Online ISSN: 3006-5895

artists, poets, merchants and craftsmen from Turkey, Iran, Arabia and Europe). All these traits were the reflection of emperor's personality, modifications, standards, observance, interests, vivaciousness and monolayer traits (Lehmann, 1984).

The evolution of Mughal School was established by the contribution of patrons, artists and masters of the studio. Akbar lavishly patronized the atelier and gave respective titles to talented artists. He employed painters at his court and paid close attention to the production and illustration of manuscripts, materials were valuable, books signified the tangible evidence of wealth, intelligence, and power. Imperial atelier consisted of painters, calligraphers, papermakers, color grinders, gold workers, leather workers, gilders, illuminators and apprentices came from different parts worked in organized studio, were specialized in specific work. The major proceeded painters became *Ustads* or Masters. He was also interested in engravings of Flemish artists, and illustrated books delivered from Europe, were brought to him by missionaries, traders and diplomats and he ordered his painters to copy these illustrations (Tola, 2025).

If his personal taste of painting was criticized by conventional Muslims in a way that this behavior led to measure the creative power of God. He explained, that "it give the impression to me, a painter had quite unusual means of recognizing God; for a painter in sketching anything that has life, creating its limbs, one after the other, and is thus forced to think of God, the Giver of life, and will thus increase in knowledge". It was mentioned in *Ain I Akbari* that if a notable guest came to the court, he betrothed with the imperial atelier by the emperor himself (Bengal, 1873).

Animals played vital and vibrant role in the society during the course of history. India was a recognized territory blessed with prosperous climate and landscape, enriched with natural resources. It is located in the tropical climatic zone; it annually received good amount of rainfall which made this land convincing and ideal place for wild life. The streams, rivers, dense forest and healthy environment regulate the survival and growth of beasts.

The elephant in Fig.1 below, known as *hathi* in India, this image provides colossal impetus of beast. Young Akbar trained the powerful beast standing in incentive gesture, under the tree, with catchy movement of colored birds, fastened the posterior legs with chain. The elephant raised his face, and curled up the trunk in anger around the white tusk with rings, and sustain the one foot in air. His ears flapping back, naturalistically observed with proportions, body of sturdy, elephant covered with red drapery and chains that made the body attractive against the background.

Akbar was passionate about elephants and had given interesting names, like *Fateh Gaj* (victory elephant), *Futuh* (unbeaten in fighting), they have the knowledge of breeding the elephants that was mentioned in Abul Fazl record, several resources were carried out for their implementation, to keep them under an organized management system. He ordered his governors to accumulate trained the elephants properly, which were used in the war. Their bodies were covered in armors, fighting beats were used to terrify the opposite forces, assault directly to the enemies, to carry heavy loads, gunpowder, baggage's, canons were fired on the back of trained elephants (Makhoty, 2020).



**Fig 1: The Mughal Emperor Akbar training an elephant, 1610 Staatliche Museum of Islamic Art, Berlin, Germany (editor, Mughal Unity, 2025).**

For centuries, animals have been used in wars. Pack animals such as camels, mules, and horses were used for carrying ammunition and supplies. In the sixteenth century, Akbar used elephants in battle. The elephants were hung with bells in order to rigorous sound frightening, and their trunks were bound to straighten them so that poisoned daggers could be attached to their ends. This painting Akbar with the wild elephant present in Victoria and Albert Museum. Akbar was famous for taming and riding his mast elephant *Hawai* and he chased another elephant on to a pontoon bridge over the river. The artist chose hazard movement of danger when elephants crossed the pontoon bridge flying into water strong diagonal lines by the bridge and shore; vivid gestures with anecdotal detail bare chested figure in foreground formed the depth by diminishing the size of the figures in background (editors, collections , 1998).

The depicted scene, Fig.2, below celebrates Akbar's bravery; he pitted two elephants against each other. He mounted and pitted against the furious elephant known for its wild and uncontrollable disposition but he still managed to control *hawai* an allegory of his governing ability. Akbar ignores the warnings and continues with no care for his own personal safety. Slanting placement of elephants upon risky bridge with boats, hasty act was based on his belief and trust in God, depiction of the thrilling story at its apex, and animals under the control of man, this scene is filled of vigor, action and excitement.

The rival rogue elephant, finally beaten and chased off across the shaky bridge. Men in the foreground were trying to balance the collapsing pontoon bridge. On the other side of the bridge a fisherman in their boat anxiously trying to get to the shore in the stormy water. By the fierce movement of the bridge, size of the figures in the distance gave depth to the painting with the use of vibrant colors and two strong diagonal lines: the bridge shore, added energy to the painting. The artist has spent time on the detail of all the characters in this painting. The elephants are seen wild and charging, but the foul one defeated and forced to hideaway, while Akbar switches with his animal, signify his courageous perception of rule (editors, Internet Archive).



**Fig 2. Allegorical depiction of Akbar's Adventure with the Elephant Hawai in 1561 painted by Basawan (editor, wordpress, 2015).**

Akbar with the Lion and Calf in Fig 3 below, portrays an allegorical portrait of Akbar incorporates with the presence of a lion and calf living in peace under the emperor's benign rule. Govardhan, a master of psychological portraiture, has given the white calf an appearance of humble tenseness, as expressed of slanting glance with lowered ears. With no doubt the lion noticeable with its teeth, above classical mythological, angels and cupids with wings holding crown, flute and stringed instrument fiddle and influence of western art and classical tradition enhance the background.

The use of highly sophisticated colors with blend of unique line quality perfectly showcases Akbar's keen interest in all artistic manners. The miniature also shows the religious harmony during Akbar's reign. Two different animals display creating a peaceful environment within Muslim and Hindu communities of that time.

The sky is filled with angels who again demonstrate an environment of peace yet an element of protection from the divine power (Fig.3). The detailed work is the result of tremendous efforts of Akbar's favorite painter, Govardhan and his favorite calligrapher Mir Ali Haravi.

In Manuscript illustrations hunting was one of the main subjects. During Akbar's reign the artist also focused to paint the hunting scenes. The hunting themes appear accessible to the painters. With the keen observation of nature, colorful portrayal of the animal life, violent action narrated in hunting scenes. Human and animal figures depicted in variety of postures with minute details in natural surroundings characterized the hunting scenes.

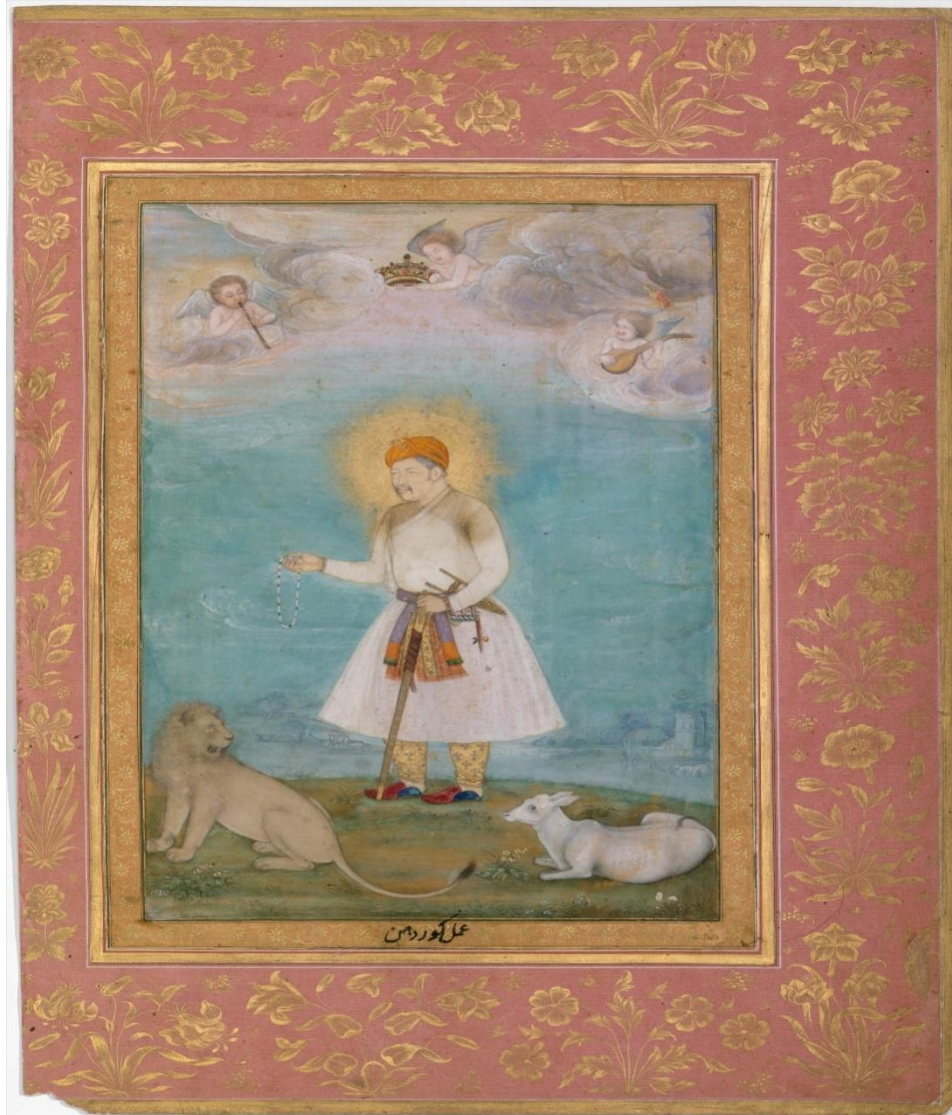


Fig 3. "Akbar with Lion and Calf", Folio from the Shah Jahan Album (editor, world history Encyclopedia, 2024).

Painting, *Akbarnama*, Akbar hunting in enclosure, outline by Miskina, painting by Mansur, opaque watercolor and gold on paper, Mughal, ca. 1590-95. Victoria and Albert Museum.

The fig 4, below is a practical example of Mongol *qamarqha*, or the ring-hunt, driven towards the center of circular area so that the emperor and his following could hunt easily. This is a chosen hunting style for both Mongols and Timurid, a proper method of enclosing a large space, like a ring of men and animals, also a kind of war-game, an opportunity to practice courage and individual skills. Also, it was an exercise to develop the coordination and discipline an electrifying, efficient, and ambitious hunt, completely surrounded by men and animals.

This is an organized system of hunting and a royal game; also, a main subject of several Mughal miniatures. Mughal ruler's bequests with agricultural land favored suitable food, clothing and other necessities for falconers and huntsmen. Animals like deer, *nilgai*, jungle cats, and jackals, like deer, ram, rabbit, cat, wild dogs, and duck also and antelopes and numerous species of antelopes which were hunted also an investment of economic and administrative resources bluebell, ram wild fox, rabbit and asses. There are some trained cheetahs as well shown falling upon the deer and black buck. There were number of hunters, or helpers who made efforts to drive the animals by shouting and on other ways in to the hunting circle. Among the animals the deer specially the black-buck has fascinated the painters most and has been sparingly depicted in the outdoor scenes.

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Hunt was a demonstration of personal skills and qualities and those who served in royal establishment were given opportunities and advancement from the emperor, by sensibly observing the nature and especially the habitat of the birds and animals.

Figure of Akbar was in the center of the painting, mounted on horseback with raising the sword. This is a spectacular hunt the game is driven towards the center of a ten-mile circular area so that the emperor and his entourage could hunt and kill the animals. It is one of the finest hunting scenes in *Akbarnama* paintings and features the early work of the artist Mansur.

This painting shed light on the fauna of the Lahore at the time of Akbar: there is a dead *Markhor* and several other animals. A blackbuck is being skinned whole, and the carcass hung up. The severed head of a blackbuck with a symmetrically circular deformed right horn, lying on the ground, can only have been reproduced by an artist who had actually seen such deformities. Three cheetahs are all coursing after fully grown male blackbucks, as they were chained to do. The other two unhooded cheetahs are in the position of released for capturing the prey by their keepers.

Among the prey species identified are nilgai, hare and chital, dead jackals (*Canis aureus*), many small Indian civets (*Viverricula indica*), possibly foxes (*Vulpes bengalensis*) and a dead hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*) as well as animals that are less naturalistically painted. As a royal duty, hunting tradition of capture the animals is a central Asian legacy. These activities helped the army alert and efficient. Hunt gave meaningful assistance to Mughal Empire for the promotion of launching the imperial rule in the foreign land and also explores their relationship to the imperial landscape. It also helped to cultivate the submission of the nobles, and ensured the hierarchical order of the empire.



Fig 4, Painting from *Akbarnama* by Miskina and Mansur in ca 1590-95 (V&A, 1998)

## Conclusion

Strange animals and creatures have always existed in every mythological culture. In Persians pre-Islamic and post-Islamic miniatures and reliefs, there are many strange animals and creatures such as dragons and phoenix which were associated with the Iranian culture and civilization, these creatures are first used in mythological life and then symbolically to express human ideas. At the Mughal court, folk tales, stories, legends, poetry and philosophy offered a canon of heroic and idealized behavior such as courage in death, ideals

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of justice, mercy and power, and wisdom. Such literature also offered a system of symbolic stratification and custom. These aspects of ritual and ideal behavior were visualized and stable in Mughal painting with a language of spatial patterns and rhythms, which served to stimulate aesthetic appreciation, as well as enhance cultural memory. These treaties, ideas and rituals would have a profound impact on the painting adopted by the artistic enthusiasm during the time of Akbar.

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