

Jannat: Paradise in Islamic Art

Mumtaz Currim, ed.

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This rare publication on Islamic art and architecture revolves around a clear conceptual idea. A plethora of broad and specific survey texts continue to be published; however, very seldom does a thematic book come along with a thorough look at one idea. The collection is composed of an introduction, a port-

folio, and ten essays. As with many compilations, the essays are not all of the same caliber and there are some structural issues. And yet the whole is a refreshing look at the theme of *jannat* (paradise) in Islamic art and architecture in the Indian subcontinent. Not only are several historical eras encompassed, but the important connection to contemporary artistic expressions is also made.

Mumtaz Currim's introduction succinctly discusses the themes covered. His excellent summary of the philosophical and cosmological concepts of paradise in relation to the garden is followed by a clear account of the *chahar bagh* (quad-partite garden) and the Mughal legacy of gardens as microcosms of paradise. The relationship of water to both gardens and paradise are reflected upon with respect to engineering and the expressions in textile art. The section concludes with a look at paradise in literary works and popular art.

The portfolio includes beautiful reproductions of two very different groups of calligraphic art. The first collection is from the twelfth- to sixteenth-century manuscript Qur'an in Hyderabad's Salar Jung Museum. The selected verses refer to paradise, such as those found in the chapters of *al-Fātiḥah* (The Opening), *al-Raḥmān* (The Merciful), and *al-Wāqī'ah* (The Event). The manuscripts' calligraphy, as well as their geometric and arabesque elaborations, are vividly reproduced in the color images. The second collection consists of contemporary artworks by Salwa Rasool, who uses canvas, vellum, leather, and other materials to focus on the Names of Allah and *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah*'s, chapter and religious phrases. With very little accompanying text, aside from the notation of details, the reader is introduced to the concept of paradise through the sheer beauty of the Qur'an's textual descriptions and the word's evocative role. The juxtaposition of historical and contemporary works reveals the continuity of the concepts in Islamic cultures.

The first essay, M. Z. A. Shakeb's "Islamic Cosmology and Paradise," provides a brief summary of cosmological studies in Islam from the tenth to the sixteenth centuries by looking at the works of the Iqwan al-Safa, Ibn Sina, Ibn al-Arabi, and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti. Unfortunately, it relies heavily on Sayyed Hossien Nasr's research rather than on the primary sources in question. The essay concludes with an analysis of the aesthetic aspects of cosmology. Yet this essay, as well as the accompanying drawings, are also heavily referenced from the research of another scholar: Keith Critchlow. As an introductory text, it summarizes other research and contributes no new insights.

The second essay, Mumtaz Currim's "Enter Thou My Paradise: The Significance of Funerary Inscriptions," concentrates on the funerary inscriptions found on major epitaphs and tombs in India from the Delhi Sultanate to Gujarat, Bengal, the Deccan, and Mughal works. The study analyzes script types

and favored phrases that mention paradise as the deceased's final abode. Although the research is fascinating, the essay needs more images of the funerary texts discussed and abruptly ends with a funerary quote from a Mughal tomb instead of a conclusion. The third essay, Azim Nanji's "Imagining Paradise: The Legacy of Mughal Garden," outlines the context, concept, form, and design followed by three key groups of Mughal gardens: the garden tomb of Humayun, the gardens of Kashmir under Jahangir, and the gardens under Shah Jahan. This detailed study renders the earthly manifestation of paradise palpable both as the aspiration of the emperors and of those who continue to enjoy them.

The fourth essay, Philippa Vaughan's "Paradise, Sovereignty, and Aesthetics under the Great Mughals," looks at the Mughal's various artistic expressions. From the initial general description of legitimacy, sovereignty, and the ideal ruler, it moves on to discuss Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan's wide-ranging patronage from tombs and mosques to portraits and translations of important literary and philosophical works. Although the study's premise is promising, her conclusion that paradise is a vital element in Mughal sovereignty seems underdeveloped, especially with so much repetition of the case studies presented in the previous essay.

One of the most original works of research is the fifth essay, Klaus Rötzer's "Supply Water to Deccan Paradises 1350-1650." Rötzer describes the geological setting of the dry Deccan area, and thus the reason for water's amplified importance as an earthly and paradise-like respite. He lists four Deccan cities and then focuses on eight examples of waterworks, including the *baoli* (step well), *ḥammām* (bath house), dams, palaces, and gardens. The author has illustrated his research with ample drawings of plans, sections, axonometric drawings, digital modeling, and photographs. The images, coupled with the concise analysis, beautifully illustrate the scientific and metaphorical shaping of an earthly paradise with water.

The sixth essay, Syamali Das' "A Woven Paradise: The Great Persian Garden Carpet of Jaipur," is a meticulous study of an extraordinary carpet acquired in the early seventeenth-century by Mirza Raja Jai Singh. A singular piece of unparalleled size (8.37 x 3.74 m) and detail, it evokes a colorful and intricate paradise through the geometries of the *chahar bagh* garden composition. The essay elucidates the carpet's history and context and analyzes its composition in terms of design, content, and colors. It concludes with the provocative statement that the design of Lahore's Mughal Shalimar Bagh was constructed after the carpet was acquired. This garden does, in fact, emulate the carpet's particular geometry and layout.

The seventh essay, Hussain Jasani's "*Jannatpuri: Text and Context*," examines the *ginan* devotional literature of the Nizari Isma'ilis, a quarter of which makes direct references to paradise. He deals with Sayyid Imam Shah's (d. 1513) *Jannatpuri*, which is a "highly mythologized account of Imam Shah's odyssey" (p. 104) to paradise. The word *Jannatpuri* is composed of *jannat* (Ar. paradise) and *puri*, which means "city" in many Indian languages. Thus the word represents the combination of different cultural ideas. Paradise is described in local terms using local flora and fauna. Similar to miniature paintings, this devotional literature is used to help visualize such spiritual concepts as paradise.

The eighth essay, Ali Akbar Husain's "*Gulshan-i Ishq: Nusrati's Gardens of Love*," describes the *masnavi* verse narratives of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries composed in Persian and Dakkani in the courts of Adil Shah's Qutb Shahis at Bijapur and Golconda. The verse narratives depict how poets perceive gardens. This piece, the *Gulshan-i Ishq (The Flower Garden of Love)* elaborates on a well-known romance story. The author summarizes the trials involved and uses the garden's description as part of the allegory and allusion of moving through spiritual trials to achieve ultimate happiness and paradise. The light, perfume, and sound of nature are imparted to evoke the experiential qualities of the paradise garden. The essay is complemented with beautiful reproductions (with text and images) from historical manuscripts as well as transliterated and translated passages from the narrative.

The ninth essay, Syed Khalid Qadri's "*Javid Nama: Iqbal's Heavenly Journey*," reviews Mohamed Iqbal's (1877-1938) magnum opus *Javid Nama*. Modeled on Dante's *Divine Comedy*, it describes the author's fantasy journey to heaven guided by Rumi. The vivid accounts evoke the specificity of India. The essay is complemented with images of a mural made in 1982 based on this narrative, located in the home of Iqbal's son. However, its relationship to the book's garden theme is tenuous because the author focuses on summarizing the narrative.

The final essay, Yusuf Saeed's "*Jannat Ki Rail: Images of Paradise in India's Muslim Popular Culture*," probes the vernacular literature and visual culture of South Asian Muslims. Examples of calendars, poster art, cassette covers, and religious pamphlets are juxtaposed with images from seventeenth-century miniatures of the *mi'rāj* (the Prophet's journey to heaven) to make the essay's case that the translation of religious concepts, especially the promise of a luxurious and plentiful paradise, continues to hold aspirational power especially for the impoverished. Thus the cassette recordings' metaphors (e.g., a "train to heaven"), posters with images of abundant fruit, and icons like the

Ka‘bah or the Prophet’s Mosque in Madinah, remain widespread. Paradise remains the ever-present promised land for those who remain on the right path, as expressed in popular vernacular art forms.

Jannat: Paradise in Islamic Art is a comprehensive thematic collection that provides some truly original insights. The cumulative effect of understanding paradise, as manifested in cosmological writing, literal garden design, carpet design, waterworks engineering, and literary and popular art, evokes the extended and encompassing power of the theme as a continuous and living concept. The focus on one region, India, enables one to easily read the parallels in the various facets. The novice and expert alike will enjoy this collection in its totality or in its particular essays. However, it would have benefitted from a concluding chapter reflecting on the theme as a whole.

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