

Musavvari: A personal take

Indranil Banerjee

GBF Fellow (Fall 2025), Museum Rietberg

In two folios of the *Tarikh-i Khandan-i Timuriya*, the famous c.1585 Mughal manuscript depicting Timurid dynasty's history up to the reign of Emperor Akbar, the master artist Basavana seems to have collaborated with two different artists. Bhim Gujarati and Nand Gwaliori– evidently hailed from two distinct geographical regions of the Indian sub-continent and must have been trained in different traditions of paintings prior to joining the Mughal workshop. Their collaboration with Basavana, who in turn was trained by the Persian masters at the court, was one of the many that marked one of the grandest yet most enigmatic moments in the history of South Asian painting. What was the nature of these collaborations? How did collective production parallel collaborative teaching in producing the next generation of artists? Most of it is lost to us today. Over the past centuries, historical conditions and vicissitudes have severely affected the traditions of painting. Yet, the flickering knowledge was preserved in art schools, in temple towns, or in the solitary studios of traditional painters in the subcontinent.



Final display of works at the musavvari

More than four centuries later, the GBF Foundation in Zurich has brought together two artists living and practicing in places across continents, to train a diverse cohort of 15 people including artists, conservators, art educators, and art historians, in the techniques of South Asian painting. Just like the term *Musavvari* cuts across times and spaces in South Asia, Dr. Murad Khan Mumtaz and Manish Soni's collaboration in painting and training truly takes one closest to experiencing the historical continuity of artistic knowledge and its evolution in the 20th and the 21st century. Murad's roots in Lahore along with his training in the National College of Arts in the Mughal idiom and Manish Soni's mastery in Rajasthani and Pahari styles, inherited through rigorous family-based training brings forth the chance to encounter the 'eclecticism' of Indian paintings that scholars often reiterate. Simultaneously, the workshop foregrounds the collective ethos in painting production and its entanglement with pedagogy within a workshop's context, carefully locating it at the tail end of the five centuries of history.

From preparing papers to grinding pigments, from studying old masters together to making brushes, the workshop momentarily transformed the experience of the space into that of an early-modern atelier. At the personal level, the practice of copying, permutation of motifs and scaling them up and down, involvement of different hands at successive stages of paintings— overall the labour involved in preserving and imparting the artistic knowledge has been the most exciting part. With two major realisations— the collective functioning of a workshop and the persistence and evolution of a tradition, I expect the impact of *Musavvari* on my scholarly pursuit to be more implicit and enduring.