

Confronting Images, Confronted Images: Jahangir versus King James I in the Freer Gallery Mughal group portrait by Bichitr (circa 1620)

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The celebrated Mughal group portrait with Jahangir sitting on an hourglass painted by Bichitr circa 1620 (Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C.) lends itself well to considering the trope of image and representation in Islam¹ (figure 1). The miniature's hybrid iconography features, among the figures depicted here, a faithful copy of a portrait of King James I of England. Traditional art historians have always superficially considered this painting to be a typical example of Mughal aesthetic syncretism. Yet beneath this apparent stylistic blending of obviously different traditions, the two opposing principles of Mughal allegorical and European illusionist portraiture produce an aesthetic combination that creates a powerful tension in the painting. Given that a work of art is not robotic, conflicting tension, disorder or disturbing elements are not necessarily signs of failure or success. They can equally be both and that is entirely part of the creative process. Nevertheless, in this essay the point is not an aesthetic appreciation of Bichitr's work but a critical examination of this dual configuration that raises fundamental questions about artistic appropriation, self-representation and representation of the Other in pre-colonial Mughal India, questions that were never addressed critically in proper aesthetic terms. It is often argued that the artifact's complex plasticity unintentionally results in a paradox that is viewed not

1 Bichitr was a young Hindu follower of Abu al-Hasan ibn Aqa Riza, of Iranian origin, who was one of Jahangir's famous leading court artists. His name, inscribed on the footstool under Jahangir's seat, certifies the painter's work. The first thorough study of this painting was done by Richard Ettinghausen (1961). Since then, no focused investigation has been done on this work.