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Company Painting of the Tomb of Safdar Jung

Mughal India (Delhi), ca. 1840–70

Watercolour on paper

28 cm high, 56 cm wide

Stock no.: A6108

Provenance: From a British private collection, owned by the descendants of the Metcalfe baronets.

In this large-scale painting, the tomb of Safdar Jung sits amid a lush landscape interspersed with wide paths. The painting is devoid of any human figures; it is the mausoleum and its surrounding landscape which are the focus of the painting, emphasised by the empty, atmospheric blue sky framing the structure.

Representations of Mughal monuments against a plain, white ground were popularly produced for European patrons and visitors from the end of the 18th century, but the monuments of Delhi began to be featured only after 1803, when the British defeated the Marathas and occupied the city.

The shift from a plain background to representing buildings within a picturesque landscape occurred c.1820.¹ In Delhi, it was the artist Ghulam Ali Khan and his family who were the most prominent and prolific of the company painters at work. One relative, Mazhar Ali Khan, active from 1840, was one of the great topographical artists. He worked on several projects for Sir Thomas Metcalfe, the East India Company's agent in Delhi from 1835 until 1853. These included the creation of over 100 paintings for Metcalfe's *Reminiscences of Imperial Delhi* (commonly referred to as the 'Delhi Book'), and a large-

scale panorama of Delhi that was almost 5 metres long.²

That this painting belonged to the Metcalfe family supports the idea that the artist was a member of Mazhar Ali Khan's circle, or his studio. The artist demonstrated their understanding of single-point perspective, while at the same time avoiding a two-dimensional, flat surface to the mausoleum. Very fine, detailed depictions of architectural features and decorative accents are included, as well as contemporary elements to the site, such as one of the platform chambers being closed off with piled-up stones. Additional delightful details are the partial reflection of the mausoleum in the pool, and the care with which the leaves and trunks of the trees have been depicted.

A later inscription on the mat identifies the monument as the tomb of Safdar Jung, and the artist as Alam.

[1] Malini Roy and Jeremiah Losty. *Mughal India: Art, Culture, and Empire*. London: British Library, 2013, p. 217.

[2] J.P. Losty, 'Depicting Delhi: Mazhar Ali Khan, Thomas Metcalfe and the Topographical School of Delhi Artists', in W. Dalrymple and Y. Sharma, ed., *Princes and Painters in Mughal Delhi, 1707-1857*. New York: Asia Society, 2012, pp. 56, 58.