



Young Prince at a Sufi Gathering

Mughal India (Delhi or Awadh), ca. 1760–1800

Opaque watercolour heightened with gold on paper, mounted on an album page with gilt-decorated floral borders, an inscription bearing the numeral 3 on reverse, framed.

Painting: 19.5 cm high, 13.1 cm wide

Folio: 39.1 cm high, 26 cm wide

A young prince sits on a riverside terrace watching two Sufis in conversation. He is accompanied by an attendant, in green, while another seated Sufi looks out at the viewer, drawing us in. A *tasbeeh* (prayer beads), bound text, roses, fruit dish, and other containers are placed on the floor in the midst of the group. In the far distance is a town located high on the embankment.

The prince has a double halo, indicating he is someone of great prominence. It is entirely plausible this

is a young Dara Shikoh, a practicing Sufi himself. Halos are also around the heads of the conversing Sufis. The more prominent figure, seated next to the prince, has a full golden halo with short rays emanating from it, while the other has a faint ring of gold encircling his head. If the prince is Dara, the two conversing sufis are likely his spiritual guide, Mullah Shah (1582–1661), and Mullah Shah's own spiritual guide, Mian Mir (1550–1635), of the Qadriyyah Sufi Order.¹

There is a roundness to the seated figures, and a sweetness to their faces. The artist may have been a follower of Mir Kalan Khan, whose penchant for figures with small, doll-like features is well known, as was his use of orange streaks in a blue sky.²

A late-18th century painting of the Delhi school that sold at Christie's London depicts a mirror image of our Sufi gathering, and identifies the main Sufi as Hazrat Baha al-Din (1318–91), the founder of the Naqshbandi Sufi order.³ While the setting and background are more developed in our painting, the group of figures is clearly based on the same source image. In the Christie's painting, the prince does not have a halo, while those of the two conversing Sufis are very prominent; in fact, they are the same as that of the prince in our painting.

[1] For numerous examples of paintings of Mullah Shah and Mian Mir seated together, and of a young Dara Shikoh seated with them, see Murad Khan Mumtaz, *Faces of God: Images of Devotion in Indo-Muslim Painting, 1500-1800*. Leiden: Brill, 2023.

[2] Beach, M.C., E. Fischer, and B.N. Goswamy. *Masters of Indian Painting*, vol 2. Zurich: Artibus Asiae Publishers, 2011, p. 613.

[3] Christie's, *Arts and Textiles of the Islamic and Indian Worlds*, lot 71, 11 April 2014.