



**Two Noblewomen Visiting a Hindu Ascetic at Night**

Mughal India (Delhi or Awadh), ca. 1720–70

Opaque watercolour heightened with gold on paper

12 cm high, 18.5 cm wide

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Provenance: French private collection.

Mughal painters frequently depicted princes, princesses, and high-ranking individuals visiting yogis at their ashrams or hermitages. Here, two ladies of noble birth sit before a Hindu ascetic. He sits cross-legged upon a tiger-skin, on a riverbank in front of his hermit's cave, which is set into a tall, rocky outcrop. His long, matted locks reach the ground, and his shaggy white beard hangs down to his midriff. His eyes are closed as he continues to pray and handle his *rudraksha* beads. These beads, the tiger skin, and his ash-covered skin all signify he is a devotee of the god Shiva.

The ladies kneel before him, both carrying offerings; one holds a plate of sweets, the other a covered dish. Both are expensively dressed and bejewelled. The city they have come from is seen in the far distance. Their clothing style, and that of their jewellery – notably their *bazu-bands* composed of square or rectangular stones, encircling the entire arm, are like those of noblewomen painted during the reign of Muhammad Shah (r. 1719–48), in a ca. 1720–40 album in the Royal Collection (RCIN 1005068, 3r). The side-glance of the lady whose face is depicted in 3/4 view is distinctive, giving her round face a very sweet expression. Similar facial depictions are seen in the works of artists who left Delhi for Awadh in the years after Muhammad Shah's reign. See, for example, a painting of a zenana at night from

ca. 1765–70, attributed to the artist Faizullah.<sup>1</sup>

[1] *Art of the Islamic and Indian Worlds Including a Private Collection Donated to Benefit the University of Oxford*, Part IV, Christie's, Lot 192, 10 October 2013.