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“Light of the World”:
The Life and Legacy of Nur Jahan (1577-1645)

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The rulers of the Mughal empire (1526-1858) used their connection to Timur (d.1405) and the Timurids to legitimize their rule over India and had always considered patronage of royal women a common practice. Timur himself claimed lineage with Genghis Khan through his wife, a relative of the Mongolian ruler, to legitimize his own rule. Because of this, female members of the Timurid and Mughal royal families were encouraged to contribute to the empire through the commissioning of charitable and non-charitable institutions. It was this convention that aided Nur Jahan, wife of Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), in her patronage of many of the architectural works commissioned during this time. Jahangir's disinterest in many of his courtly duties left an opening for Nur Jahan and her family to control the empire for most of their marriage. This, along with the interest, both positive and negative, of contemporary and modern historians, has made Nur Jahan one of the more well-known Mughal queens. This paper will consider the style of her architecture and its influence on later works in relation to her unique situation as the main ruler of the empire.

The Rise and Fall of Nur Jahan

Nur Jahan, then named Mihrunnisa, was born to Persian parents fleeing poverty under the rule of Shah Ismail II (r. 1576-1577) in Safavid Iran. Her family hoped to find refuge under Akbar (r. 1556-1605) in India as many members of their family had already done.¹ Nur Jahan was born in Kandahar in 1577, as her family traveled from Iran to the Mughal court. Many stories about Nur Jahan's childhood have been told to explain her rise to power. One such account was that her parents were robbed shortly after her birth and she was left at the side of the road because they could no longer afford a third child. When her grieving parents decided they must return for her, they found her sitting, unharmed next to a black snake.² Anecdotes such as this were used later in her life to show that she had always been naturally charmed. Once the family reached the court of Akbar, people have claimed she and the future Jahangir had been seen together in their youth. However, there is no proof they had met until Navroz, an important celebration of the Persian New Year in Jahangir's court, in 1611.³ Her first marriage was to a Persian adventurer, Sher Afgan, in 1594 with whom she had one daughter.⁴ This was her only child as she and Jahangir did not have any children. After Sher Afgan's death, Nur Jahan worked as a lady-in-waiting as it was customary for the court to provide for widows.⁵ Although her family found powerful positions within the Mughal court, they had not come from royalty. Because of this, historians who have written about Nur Jahan have created various narratives, both positive and negative, about her life to explain the power she held.

Nur Jahan married Jahangir in 1611, after they had met earlier that year. The marriage was commemorated by Jahangir with the addition of an enormous stone basin, likely for wine, to

¹ Ellison Banks Findly, *Nur Jahan, Empress of Mughal India* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 10.

² Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 10.

³ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 35.

⁴ D. Fairchild Ruggles, ed., *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies* (Albany: State of New York Press, 2000), 108.

⁵ Findly, *NurJahan*, 32.

his Agra fort. This basin is similar to the one he commissioned in Kabul.⁶ Although Jahangir did not immediately write about his marriage to Nur Jahan in his memoirs, she is mentioned 17 times. One reference to her occurred after Jahangir made a short-lived promise to never hunt again. He had Nur Jahan shoot for him, as he was very impressed by her hunting abilities, and he claimed she was able to kill a lion in one shot.⁷ He also wrote about the care he received from her when he was sick, stating she treated him “better than any physician.”⁸ In the travel journals of Europeans, such as Francisco Pelsaert (1590-1630) and Peter Mundy (1596-1667), Nur Jahan is described negatively. Pelsaert, who had travelled to Jahangir’s court during Nur Jahan’s reign, wrote that the Queen was a “crafty wife of humble lineage.”⁹ He felt she had taken over the empire with her brother and father and that she would spend an exorbitant amount of money to build serais and develop her legacy through her architectural work. He also described how Jahangir was not interested in anything but hunting and drinking. Pelsaert claimed that she would wait until Jahangir was inebriated to ask for permission for her projects.¹⁰ Peter Mundy also felt similarly to Pelsaert during his time in the Mughal court. He suggested that Nur Jahan was supposed to be the prisoner of Jahangir after the death of her husband, possibly referring to her time as a lady-in-waiting, but “hee became her prisoner by Marryeing her.”¹¹ As men from seventeenth-century Europe, they would take issue with the wife of a king having political control over an empire.

⁶ Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 113.

⁷ Nur al-Din Muhammad Jahangir, *Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*, trans. Wheeler Thackston (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 313.

⁸ Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 368.

⁹ Francisco Pelsaert, *Jahangir’s India the Remonstrantie of Francisco Pelsaert*, trans. W.H. Moreland and P. Geyl (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons LTD., 1925) 50.

¹⁰ Pelsaert, *Jahangir’s India*, 51.

¹¹ Peter Mundy, *The Travels of Peter Mundy 1608-1667* (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1914) 205.

While there is no way of knowing what Nur Jahan's own motives were, Jahangir showed his support of her authority by giving her the position of financial advisor after the death of her father.¹² He also allowed her to mint coins in her name, an honor that was reserved for the emperor.¹³ The few coins that survive from her reign are minted in gold and silver. They bear Nur Jahan and Jahangir's name on either side in Persian script (fig. 1). These coins provide evidence of Nur Jahan's unique reign as she was the only Mughal queen allowed to mint coins. Another reflection of the power Nur Jahan held, also distinct to her sovereignty, is represented in the portraits painted of her.

Fig.1 1620 by Abu'l Hasan (Harvard Art Museum)

¹² Jahangir's addiction to opiates lead to his failing health which in turn allowed Nur Jahan to take greater control of the empire.

¹³ Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 128.

In addition to the political positions she held, Jahangir's favor for Nur Jahan can be seen in the titles she was given as a wife. After their wedding, Jahangir gave her the name Nur Mahal or "Light of the Palace." She held this title until 1616, when he gave her the more exalted title of Nur Jahan, meaning "Light of the World."¹⁴ She and Jahangir ruled together until his death in 1627.

Nur Jahan's power and influence created issues with her step-son, Shah Jahan, and, after his father's death, he sent Nur Jahan to live in exile until she died 18 years later. The rift between the two was created in part by Nur Jahan's push to have Jahangir's son, Shahriyar, who was married to her daughter, take the throne after the death of his father. This resulted in Shah Jahan's revolt, which took place shortly after the death of Nur Jahan's father. These two events began to destabilize the empire.¹⁵ In her time as queen, Nur Jahan was able to create many architectural works with her substantial fortune she acquired through her trade routes, her family fortune, and money given to her by Jahangir. However, by the time of her death, she held little political power. Shah Jahan, in addition to removing her from the court, destroyed many of the coins she had minted.¹⁶ This was one of the ways he attempted to dismantle her legacy. At the time of her death she was powerless, much like her family when they first traveled to India.

Depictions in Art

In Mughal painting, women are often shown as idealized female figures instead of individual people. In the portraiture of Nur Jahan, however, there are many individualized

¹⁴ Findly, *Nur Jahan*, 40.

¹⁵ Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 128.

¹⁶ "The Coin Galleries: Jahangir", *Coin India; Indian Coins from Ancient to Modern Times, The Virtual Museum of India Coins*, accessed March 27th, 2017, <http://coinindia.com/galleries-jahangir.html>.

aspects of her face leading historians to believe the portraits of her are some of the few examples of naturalistic portraiture of a Mughal queen. Two portraits of her are *Nur Jahan: Portrait to be Worn as a Jewel* (fig. 2) painted by Abu'l Hasan and *Nur Jahan, Holding a Portrait of Jahangir* (fig. 3). The first portrait shows Nur Jahan in front of a black background. Her face is painted in profile while her chest is painted with a slight turn. The painting cuts off at the mid-chest and a colored table is painted below her, upon which Nur Jahan rests a hand. She wears a tan headscarf with darker tan scarves and pearl jewelry. Around the painting is a tan border with simple, black, floral line drawings. The latter shows Nur Jahan holding a portrait of Jahangir. This painting shows Nur Jahan's full figure and she wears a long, sheer white dress with vertically striped blue and white pants beneath. On her head and shoulders are green and orange scarves. The portrait of Jahangir that she holds shows him as an old man; this was likely painted after Jahangir's death as it is very similar to the painting *Jahangir Holding a Portrait of Akbar* which was created shortly after Akbar's death. In it, Jahangir holds a small painting of an elderly Akbar. Although the composition is similar in this and other paintings, emperors such as Jahangir and Akbar are shown with a nimbus which visually represents their divine right to rule. Nur Jahan, as an unofficial ruler is never depicted in this way. *Nur Jahan Holding a Portrait of Jahangir* has a dark green background with two different borders. The first border is dark with white flowers and gold leaves with a golden edge. The second border has a white background with a red floral pattern and a red border along the outside. Although these paintings differ slightly, many of Nur Jahan's features are consistent in both. She is shown as having a long, straight nose, long eyebrows, and a slightly prominent chin. These features are individualized while other features, like her large, almond-shaped eyes are conventional for Mughal women.

Fig.2 Silver Rupee 1627-28 (Source: CoinIndia)

Fig.3 1627 (Cleveland Museum of Art)

The naturalistic way of portraying her can be seen in *Jahangir and Prince Khurram Entertained by Nur Jahan* (fig.4) because the painting also features other women. In this

painting, Nur Jahan is shown sitting across from Jahangir and Prince Khurram, later Shah Jahan. They are sitting in one of the gardens created by Nur Jahan called the Ram Bagh; the pavilions of the garden can be seen in the background. They are surrounded by female courtly figures. Along the right and left side of the painting are inscriptions followed by a gold border. Outside of this is a second border with gold floral motifs against a dark blue background. The female figures follow the traditional, idealized portraiture of women and the differences between them and Nur Jahan can be seen in their smaller, upturned noses, short brows, and rounded chins. Nur Jahan is depicted similarly to how she was in the other paintings with a straight nose, long brows, and a pointed chin. The paintings of Nur Jahan show the power she was able to acquire, as did the coins she minted, that other royal women in the Mughal court were not given.

Fig.4 (Freer Gallery of Art)

Nurmahal Caravanserai

Many royal women built complexes in the Mughal empire and this is especially true during the reign of Jahangir, who did not commission any mosques.¹⁷ His mother and Nur Jahan built all the large architectural works from this time. One example, Nur Jahan's Nurmahal caravanserai, located in Punjab, was commissioned in 1618, and was finished two years later (fig.5).¹⁸ It is possible she built at this location because of the time she spent here as a child.¹⁹ More importantly, the location was along the road that led from Kashmir to Agra, where Jahangir had ordered many serais to be built for travelers.²⁰ The road between these cities was significant to Jahangir as his court traveled between them and it was an essential trade route. This serai, because of its location, allowed Nur Jahan to collect tariffs, which in turn enabled her to patronize other institutions. For both men and women across the Islamic empires of the early modern period, money gave them the power to build.²¹ Pelsaert understood the movement of the court as Jahangir's desire to be in the cold climate of Kashmir during summer months, much to the displeasure of his nobles.²² Although Mundy writes in his book that this serai was built by Nur Jahan, the footnotes-written by a later editor- claim this serai for Jahangir, another example of how different cultures have considered her power. It is now understood to have been built by Nur Jahan because of the inscriptions which provide her name.

¹⁷ Ebba Koch, *Mughal Architecture an Outline of its History and Development* (Munich: Prestel, 1991), 83.

¹⁸ Koch, *Mughal Architecture*, 90.

¹⁹ Wayne E. Begley, "Four Mughal Caravanserais Built During the Reign of Jahangir and Shah Jahan" *Muqarnas* Vol. 1 (1989): 168.

²⁰ Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 128.

²¹ Ruggles, *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation*, 8.

²² Pelsaert, *Jahangir's India*, 35.

Fig.5 Nurmahal Caravanserai (by Catherine A)

The facade on the gates of the serai has many aspects which make it unique. Many serais built at this time had brick gateways but the Nurmahal serai's west gateway was instead built in red sandstone.²³ The gate is connected to the walls by octagonal towers at each corner.²⁴ The gateway is built with an inner and outer pointed archway surrounded by two balconies supported by brackets. Above the gate are large crenellations with a column at each corner.²⁵ On the red sandstone gate of the serai there are figural and geometric carvings, similar to those featured on other serais built at this time. The serai also uses sculptural figures that have Hindu influences. An example of the Islamic motifs are the relief sculptures on the gate which show four symmetrical birds surrounding a vase. Floral motifs surround this center relief which are also symmetrical. Above and below these and on the jambs of the larger arch are geometric designs in a zigzag pattern. At the upper and lower corners of the entrance the reliefs depict elephants,

²³ Begley, *Four Mughal Caravanserais*, 168.

²⁴ Begley, *Four Mughal Caravanserais*, 168.

²⁵ Begley, *Four Mughal Caravanserais*, 168.

which were common in Mughal decorative sculpture like those on the Kanch Mahal in Agra (fig.6).

Fig.6 Detail of bay window Kanch Mahal (Source: Moghul Colour Decoration of Agra)

The Kanch Mahal was another serai built during Jahangir's reign, which also used many of the vegetal and floral motifs seen at the Nurmahal serai. This serai has sculptural figures of elephants, like those at Nurmahal but they are sculptural elements instead of raised relief. The depiction of a vase is featured on the Kanch Mahal but it is not surrounded by women like the one at Nurmahal. Indic influences can be seen in the reliefs of two female figures surrounding another large vase which are located the sides of the larger arch. This vase is similar to the one featured in the center relief. Like all reliefs on Islamic architecture, there is a balanced composition between the figures. The female figures wear long, straight dresses; this modest dress, unlike that seen on the figures of Hindu temples, would be more appropriate for an Islamic structure.

The Jagat Shiromani temple, a Hindu temple from 1590 built in Amber, Rajasthan by Raja Man Singh, has similar relief sculptures which use the female figure (fig. 7). Although it, as a Hindu structure, has a much different architectural layout, the use of women in architecture decoration would have influenced the Mughal rulers who saw it. These figures have compositions comparable to the Nurmahal ones because of the square framing and symmetry of figures on either side, but those on the Hindu temple do not follow such strict symmetry as those at Nurmahal. They also wear a different style of clothing more in line with representations of Hindu women. The female figures from the Nurmahal serai are influenced by the Hindu temples of India, which is not seen on other serais in the Indo-Islamic empire. This could also be a result of a female patron or because of Nur Jahan's individual style.

Fig.7 Tomb of I'timad al-Daula (by Catherine A)

Inside the red sandstone gate of the caravanserai were 124 chambers, a mosque, and a three story royal apartment where Nur Jahan once entertained Jahangir.²⁶ Wayne Begley has

²⁶ Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 128.

inferred that the Nurmahal serai shows Nur Jahan's "imperial aspirations rather than her piety".²⁷

Although a ruler could collect taxes from the serais they built, they are still considered charitable institutions because they provide a service for those travelling within the empire and travelers could stay inside the courtyard without paying a fee.²⁸ Because of the Western gate's similarity to Akbar's Buland Darwaza gate at Fatehpur Sikri, Begley feels that she is attempting to legitimize legacy through architectural parallels.²⁹ Both gates have an inner and outer archway, although the Buland Darwaza has three inner arches, and they are surrounded by arched balconies. The Buland Darwaza is also much larger than the gate at the Nurmahal serai.

Regardless of the similarities, it is important to note how rulers have always used past leaders to legitimize their reign, even those outside of the Mughal empire. Humayun, the second Mughal emperor, manipulated his connection to earlier dynasties to legitimize the expansion of the empire. Because of its many influences from both Islamic and Hindu sources, the Nurmahal serai is an example of Nur Jahan combining the dual cultures within the Mughal empire. The structure is proof of Nur Jahan's power within the empire because of her financial success. It also is an example of her as the main patron of charitable structures in the empire. Although all members of the royal family were expected to commission architectural works, building large complexes- especially mosque complexes- was seen as a requirement of the emperor. Seeing as Jahangir did not create any structures like this during his reign, this responsibility was left to Nur Jahan.

Tomb of I'timad al-Daula

²⁷ Begley, *Four Mughal Caravanserais*, 170.

²⁸ Begley, *Four Mughal Caravanserais*, 168.

²⁹ As mentioned earlier, historians form opinions based on the norms of their own culture. Begley, as a man born in the early 20th century may be more sceptical of Nur Jahan's motives because of his own cultural upbringing. His research also focuses on Shah Jahan, who- because of her attempt to remove him from the throne- felt very negatively about Nur Jahan. He may have agreed with Shah Jahan's assessment of Nur Jahan.

After the death of her parents in 1621, Nur Jahan commissioned the Tomb of I'timad al-Daula (fig. 8). The tomb, although known solely after her father, holds both her parents who died in the same year. After the death of her father, Jahangir wrote in his memoirs that he was saddened by his death and that Nur Jahan inherited her father's property and position in the court.³⁰ As the *wazir* and *wakil* to Jahangir, or high minister and minister of finances, I'timad al-Daula was the most important member of the court and a significant person in the emperor's life.³¹ The tomb took a total of six years to finish and Nur Jahan spared no expense on her beloved parents.³²

Fig.8 Detail of Tomb of I'timad al-Daula (by Catherine A)

The tomb is a marble structure with a red sandstone gate on the east side that is attached to the road. The western gate faces the river; both the western gate and the tomb are multiple

³⁰ Jahangir, *Jahangirnama*, 376.

³¹ Koch, *Mughal Architecture*, 11.

³² Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 128.

stories.³³ There are other structures, in the same style as the east and west gate, on the north and south side, but these are not functional entrances. On all four sides of the red sandstone gates there are marble inlays, which were common characteristics of architecture in the empire.³⁴ Inside the gate is the marble tomb structure surrounded by gardens, split into four equal sections. The four corners of the tomb are rounded at 270 degrees and in the center is a canopied dome.³⁵ Each rounded tower also has a domed top with arched windows below. The arches of the windows and entrances of the tomb all have a pointed top which is a hallmark of Islamic architecture.

Canopied domes were also used in tombs of Sufi *shaykhs*, or leaders. One of these *shaykhs*, Shaykh Muhammad Ghauth had a tomb at Gwalior that used white marble domes in the catafalque of the mausoleum.³⁶ The tomb sits on top of a red sandstone plinth.³⁷ Inside the tomb, the rooms are arranged in a ninefold plan.³⁸ The floor plan of this tomb continued in popularity into the reign of Shah Jahan.³⁹ On both the inside and outside of the tomb, the white marble is inlaid with highly polished, semi-precious stones in a technique called *pietra dura* (fig. 9). A simpler form of inlaying stone can be seen at Akbar's tomb while the more complex Italian tradition of *pietra dura* became common during the later reign of Shah Jahan. The use of it in I'timad al-Daula's tomb fits somewhere between that of Akbar and Shah Jahan. The stones used for the tomb are shades of yellow and brown, arranged in geometric patterns with many circular, hexagonal, and octagonal forms. Inside the tomb the *pietra dura* continues, using many

³³ Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 130.

³⁴ Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 131.

³⁵ Koch, *Mughal Architecture*, 74.

³⁶ Koch, *Mughal Architecture*, 74.

³⁷ Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 131.

³⁸ Koch, *Mughal Architecture*, 74.

³⁹ Koch, *Mughal Architecture*, 75.

Persianate and paradisiacal motifs.⁴⁰ Here there is another example of the vase which was featured at the Nurmahal serai and other serais as well as imagery of flora and wine vessels. The inside of the tomb also features wall paintings using similar decorative motifs. The innermost portion also holds the simple, stone coffins of I'timad al-Daula and his wife. It also has the most elaborate *pietra dura* and paintings as well as a polychrome ceiling.⁴¹

The only room of the second story sits directly above the center chamber. Inside are two more false cenotaphs, a common element of Mughal tombs. The screens on the upper level allow light to enter the room and the floor has inlays of Persianate motifs, similar to those found in expensive Safavid carpets.⁴² By using paradisiacal motifs, Nur Jahan references God and the paradise that awaits her parents. As in her Nurmahal serai, Nur Jahan used newer materials, such as the red sandstone and white marble. The design aspects used here came to the Mughal empire through trade with other cultures. The *pietra dura* and female figures show that Nur Jahan power and influence over the architecture built at this time. These decorative forms at the tomb of I'timad al-Daula are attached to her Persian ancestry. This is similar to how the female figures carved on the Nurmahal serai are distinct to Nur Jahan because she is a female patron.

Conclusion

Many authors, other than Jahangir, have written extensively about the life of Nur Jahan and have formed opinions about her personality, despite her never having written anything about

⁴⁰ Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 132.

⁴¹ Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 131.

⁴² Asher, *Architecture of Mughal India*, 133.

herself.⁴³ As discussed earlier, contemporary European writers felt negatively about Nur Jahan. However, female writers of the twentieth century, such as Ellison Banks Findly, often write about Nur Jahan in a more positive light, heralding her as a sort of early feminist hero. Obviously both of these opposing opinions have clear cultural biases. In the case of European writers, the idea of a powerful queen, even one who had the support of her husband, was always seen as suspect. Yet the same information analyzed by a female writer in the late twentieth century could be seen as a female ruler fighting for women's empowerment because of the influence the modern feminist movement may have had on the writer. In any case, the examples examined in the paper show the outside influences on the architecture commissioned by Nur Jahan. She was able to patronize her own structures which reflected the culture surrounding her. It is through this duality of cultures in the empire and her unusual situation as the most powerful person in the Mughal court that allowed her to commission the many complexes she did during the time. It was this unusual amount of power, which has created such varying opinions about her by historians, that allowed her to create the works she did.

About the author

Maggie Schuster is a recent graduate from the University of Minnesota. She graduated in May 2017 with a major in Art History and minor in Gender Women and Sexuality Studies.

⁴³ Gavin R.G. Hambly, *Review: Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India by Ellison Banks Findly, The American Historical Review*, June 1994, <http://www.jstor.org.ezp2.lib.umn.edu/stable/2167895>.