

# A conversation with Ebba Koch

***Narayani Gupta:*** *You have given us a wonderful book on the Taj Mahal. How did you develop this passion for Indian, particularly Mughal, architecture and art?*

**Ebba Koch:** I have had a long relationship with Mughal architecture, painting and decorative arts. My doctoral dissertation, on the inlay work at Delhi's Red Fort, enabled me to combine my earlier interest in European art with a new field of investigation: Mughal art and architecture. I had studied European art history at the University of Vienna with Otto Pächt, Otto Demus and Renate Wagner-Rieger and had a solid training in the methods of the Viennese school of art history. My husband had diplomatic postings in Asia, and we travelled in South East Asia and then came to India. I was very impressed by Mughal architecture; so when he was offered a posting here, I urged him to accept it because I wanted to do my dissertation on the Mughals.

After we arrived in 1976, I undertook extensive field-studies to familiarize myself with the monuments, and then decided to work

By **Narayani Gupta, Ira Pande**

on Shahjahani architecture. This was following a moment of inspiration in the Moti Masjid of the Agra Fort. As I became aware of its perfect balance between the rational and the sensuous, a characteristic of Shahjahani architecture, I felt that this was really what I would like to work on. Also, by this time I had started studying Persian with Dr. Yunus Jaffery, who was teaching at the old Delhi College, renamed Zakir Hussain College. While going through the histories of the Mughals, it became clear to me that Shahjahan's time was one of great architectural awareness. For the first time in Mughal history we also have texts to go with all imperial building projects: these make an exploration both interesting and fruitful.

**NG:** *When you came to India, what sense did you have of art history in our country? As I see it, it is unfortunate that our schools of architecture do not teach history seriously and courses of history, for most part, still concentrate on political and economic themes; there is hardly anything on architecture, art or aesthetics.*

**EK:** In India, architectural history and art history follow the British tradition where these areas are not given much emphasis. If it were not for two schools in London – the Courtauld and the Warburg Institute (the latter, in a way, was an import from Germany), we would not have much interpretative and analytical art history in England either. In India, the study of architecture is something which emerges out of the manner in which the Archaeological Survey of India works – recording monuments, giving detailed descriptions and plans and measured drawings, with an assessment of the architecture. Important questions – such as which form is used in which context, where the form comes from, where is it modified, and what sort of meaning it could have for the builder – these are not often investigated.

What makes the study of Mughal architecture especially difficult is that precise recording had never been done for much of it, or, if it had been undertaken, it was not published. We have some pioneering studies – that of Smith for Fatehpur Sikri, a documentation of Akbar's tomb and of Itimad-ud-Daulah's tomb – but no survey or architectural documentation on the entire Taj Mahal complex had ever been published. From the methodological point of view, I was in a situation where, on the one hand, I had to undertake

very basic documentation and investigations as had been done in the nineteenth century while, on the other hand, I wanted to answer all the questions that the discipline of art history had developed in the twentieth century. A formal analysis has been a strong point of the Viennese school of art history, but elsewhere today the approach has moved away from formal assessment and analysis towards contextual studies. I tried to use a *combined* methodology, to establish the form and then to take the form as my guide for looking into the context. The architecture of Shahjahan is extremely well-suited for this form of investigation because, at that time, architecture was done so systematically that you can derive the principles and the intentions of the builders by just looking at it. This is what I have been trying to do for the Taj Mahal, as earlier for the audience halls of Shahjahan, which are wonderful examples of how to take architecture as a guide.

I don't want to be seen as in opposition to a text-based history, because I use texts extensively and I try to explore all genres – not only histories but also poetry, which I think is also very important for an understanding of artwork. But I feel that sometimes architecture can tell us things which other texts cannot. One has to try to weigh one against the other.

**NG:** *That is a lovely phrase: to take architecture as a guide. Most interpreters simply state that a building represents 'x' or 'y' style. Can you tell us more about this, with examples from your study of the Taj Mahal and the palaces of Shahjahan?*

**EK:** If we take the palaces of Shahjahan, and in particular the audience halls, the text would tell us that they have been built to protect the nobles from rain. Yet when we look at the halls, we get another image – The halls are called *Chehel Sutun*, '40 pillars'. I found out that, in a specific way, this term was also used to designate Persepolis. It was used like a proper name. And the halls indeed have 40 pillars. Multi-pillared halls were something new in the Mughal context for audience halls though they had been used by the Tughlaqs and in the palaces of the Mauryans at Pataliputra, the Patna of today.

**NG:** *What about the Tughlaq hazaar sutoon and the 1000-pillared temple-halls at Madurai?*

**EK:** I have dealt with the examples I mention above in my study and suggested that they were also inspired by Persepolis. The Mughals revived the idea of multi-pillared audience halls and inspiration (as probably already in the halls of the earlier periods) was taken from Persepolis. It had never been forgotten and there are inscriptions through the centuries of rulers visiting it, also of the Timurid ancestors of the Mughals. So, Persepolis had become a symbol of rulership. The Shahjahani audience hall has 40 pillars, but it was indeterminate which *shape* should be given to it, as Persepolis itself was only preserved in fragments.

When we look at the plans I had prepared with Richard Barraud (who has worked with me for 20 years on recording Mughal monuments) the halls are seen to have a wider nave at the centre and are constructed like mosques. In the mosque, the nave in the centre leads to the *mihrab*; and in the audience hall it leads to the throne, the focus of the empire. By just looking at the architecture, we can see that Shahjahan wanted to give expression to his authority or sovereignty, the worldly and the spiritual. To establish this, you have to take measurements of all of the halls, which is a very tedious procedure.

The Taj, of course, is far more complicated because it is such a huge complex. I was very lucky in getting permission to measure it, perhaps because I had been working for such a long time, and because I knew the staff of the Archaeological Survey. They also gave me permission to take photographs. As the base for my investigations, I prepared with Richard Barraud detailed and scientific drawings of this building to scale.

What I have been trying to do is to abstract the *principles* of architecture. To name just one, we find that the emphasis on mirror symmetry governs the entire complex. The chief elements, the white marble mausoleum, the pool, and the gate are set on the main axis, and they are flanked by perfectly symmetrical buildings, mosque and Mihman Khana, the two garden wall pavilions, and the galleries on both sides of the gate. Towers are set at the corners. If only the smallest element would be missing, the harmony of the entire concept would be destroyed.

Another thing that struck me about the Taj Mahal was the *shastric* influence. I was reading the Shilpa Shastra (*Vishnudharmottara Purana*)

where white materials and white stone are recommended for buildings of Brahmins, and red for buildings of Kshatriyas. This made something jump to my eyes. When you look at the Taj complex, the very studied use of white marble and red sandstone seems to be the way (in which) the Mughals related themselves to the hierarchies of the Indian social system. This is how, when you look at architecture and texts, you have to make one aspect bear on the other.

**NG:** *Marble was regarded as the superior material even by Lutyens who planned to make the Viceroy's Palace in white marble until the exigencies of the War made him cut costs and make a Kshatriya palace, if you like, in very beautiful Dholpur stone. Are there any other elements which link the Taj to a non-Islamic tradition in India, or to European fashions or traditions?*

**EK:** The fascinating thing about Mughal architecture, when taken as a whole, is that it synthesizes so many elements. We can see this in Fatehpur Sikri and I do not want to simply categorize it, as many architectural historians have done and continue to do, into 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' styles. I felt that it was a great point with the Mughals to raise the regional to the imperial level. Certain regional Sultanate styles in India were considered particularly successful in integrating older Indian forms, such as those of Bengal or Gujarat. The Mughals would take these styles, express them in a new monumental way and combine it with Central Asian or Iranian elements. A very interesting observation made by Akbar gives us the sense behind this. In a letter to Shah Abbas, he chastises the Shah for his intolerance and elitist methods, saying: Because I accept all cultures and all religions, it gives me the right to rule above them all! Akbar used tolerance as an instrument to the right to be a universal ruler.

We can also see this synthesis in architecture as something to develop the imperial style. It is harder to detect in the Taj where the forms came from. But there is an interesting link to older Indian ideas, in the use of the *purna kalash* motif, which we have in the corner colonnettes of the central tomb-chamber. The purna kalash is an overflowing pot that stands for prosperity or fertility. In the Taj, it connects to the progressive augmentation, one could say, of plant ornamentation. In this

way, an Indian element is used to express a symbolic idea, and European forms like vases are used to strengthen this type of plant ornament. There is a very telling statement by the Mughal chronicler, Kanbo, saying that foreign elements in art were like an offering by another culture to the Mughal emperor.

**NG:** *What 'offerings' did the Mughals take from the Europeans? Can you elaborate on the use of the pietra dura, which you have studied for the panel in the Diwan-e-Aam of the Delhi Red Fort?*

**EK:** *Pietra dura* was crucially important for the Taj Mahal as well. The Mughals were very selective in appropriation, and only took what served a particular purpose: a planned copying, so to speak

In the Taj, I see a progression of flower ornaments, which reaches its culmination in the centre. Significantly, there is no flower ornament in the outer courts; it starts to appear in the garden and then increases in abundance in the mausoleum. The Mughals saw the European pietra dura technique as the means to create naturalistic flowers for the Taj. Flowers were important from the symbolic point of view because, according to my interpretation, the Taj is not an architectural realization of the throne of God, but an image here on earth (like a reversed platonic image) of the house that was prepared for Mumtaz in Paradise. The garden house, in particular, needs flowers and the flowers in the Taj were made in the most naturalistic technique to create *permanent* flowers. They would not smell, as the poet Kalim tells us, but when done in this complex technique would bloom for ever.

They used semi-precious stones, which are very hard. It is a very complex technique of stone-cutting and inlaying with naturalistic effects, which was peculiar to the Italians, but – and I have discussed this with one of our foremost experts on hard stone carving as we looked together at Italian and Mughal pietra dura art and he agreed with me – the Mughal work far surpasses the Italian in this respect! So this appropriation of a foreign technique surpassed the source of inspiration and was applied to give the Mughals' own concept more weight. To assimilate the 'foreign', means, as the French archaeologist P. Veyne has put it, 'to bring one's own identity up to date'.

**Ira Pande:** *What struck me when I stood at the southern gateway*

*and viewed the Taj from there for the first time, was that the stones on the floor there are in multiples of eight. This means that if you stand on the central axis of the four main stones, you see just the main tomb building. When you move a little further, up and down on that axis, it's like seeing the Taj as a moving picture. Suddenly, you see two minarets, and then you see all four. It is an incredible experience ... apparently the entire complex is built in such a way that you get different perspectives from different aspects of it. Can you comment on this?*

**EK:** We can speak here of a 'directed viewing', of a planning of visual axes to bring the mausoleum, the paradisiacal house of Mumtaz, literally into focus. The Taj is perfectly symmetrically planned, and everything is centered on this main axis. This is the Shahjahani symmetry, which I have described. You are perfectly right: this idea of movement and progression towards it along the central axis in a way is part of the concept, and scholars have been trying to get a grip on the Taj in order to work out the proportions and the planning. But it seems that this was more complex. This is something that Richard has worked on. Different modules were used for different parts of the building. The base of it all is the Shahjahani *gaz*, about 32 feet (80-82cm). You have different units: for instance the garden is based on a 11.5 gaz unit: different buildings have different units. It is a very complex form of planning, something we have studied on the ground. We would need to investigate how this would apply to elevations and to proportions.

The geometrical planning extends also to the ornament but only to a certain extent. The paving of the pathways – we have been collecting patterns of all the pathways which shows the different geometrical forms. It is very interesting because there was this general notion in the nineteenth century that Islamic ornamentation is purely geometric. But it is a *historical* form and also a *regional* form, and was not accepted in the same way in all areas where Islamic rule was established. In all the great empires like the Ottoman, the Savafid, and the Mughal, geometric ornament was once mainstream and was then superseded by floral forms of decoration; however, the geometric ornament is not completely abandoned, but it is used in a marginal area. In the Taj it is the floral ornament that becomes predominant, the geometric ornament is used

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for lesser elements, such as the walkways.

**IP:** *As you approach the Taj, you suddenly see the reflection in the pool, then you see just the main building reflected, then you see the minarets – and exactly at that point, to have chosen that point for the pool where the reflection of the Taj falls is an incredible feat of engineering and calculation, to have known exactly where it would fall; and one false foot here or there would have loped off one part of it.*

**EK:** When you look at the Taj, you get the most satisfying view. You can only move along the central axis.

**NG:** *Is it possible to see the influence of Mughal gardens in France, particularly in Versailles ...?*

**EK:** I think that much of this geometric planning in European gardens has been influenced by Islamic and perhaps even Mughal designs, but don't tell this to European garden stylers, because, as we all know, influences can only travel from West to East, and hardly ever from East to West!

**IP:** *I find it fascinating that this was the period when the Tudors were ruling in England, the Safavids in Iran, the Ottomans in Turkey and the Mughals in India. Many of the rulers were also proud individuals who wanted to be the best in the world; there was a great sense of arrogance, which is implicit in the imperial style period.*

**EK:** In the use of art and architecture as an instrument of representation, I have always been struck by this coincidence. Is this a direct connection or is it an independent development? Another aspect of it is the rivalry between Iran and India. I agree that in the sixteenth century Iran gave, and the Mughals received. But in the seventeenth century Iranian painting was very much influenced by Mughal painting, and in the eighteenth century you can observe it also in architecture. Again, the Mughals sometimes felt a bit inferior vis-a-vis the Safavids because they ruled Iran, and Iran was the historic site of kingship, a kingship celebrated in the *Shahnama* of Firdausi. Later, Nadir Shah, when he went back to Iran, built himself a palace in the north-east in the mountains of Hazar Masjid bordering Turkmenistan. It is called Kalat-i Nadiri and faced with sandstone and with basreliefs of flower vases. I discussed this with Sussan Babaie who is a scholar of Safavid palaces and she

agreed: she told me that Nadir Shah took Indian craftsmen back with him. And that is not all. The structure is topped by a *minar* that looks like a truncated Qutb Minar!

***IP:*** *While reading 'My Name is Red' by Orhan Pamuk, I was struck by what was happening in terms of the travelling of motifs from one part of the world to the other, sometimes stealing them, murders being committed for them. 'My Name is Red' is like a murder mystery about using human form representation in Islamic painting. I wonder if what was happening in painting happened in architecture. I wonder what the human histories behind these imports were, how they came, and how those terrible legends grew up around the Taj saying that the hands of those workers were cut off.*

**EK:** I found out that there exists an established corpus of folk literature with this theme: 'King kills architect after completion of famous building'. We have it from many grand buildings in the world. This is a sort of common theme in the legends of mankind, something which is told by the guides to the visitors.

***NG:*** *At the India Forest Institute at Dehradun, I was told that the British had built this, and after it was completed they cut off the hands of the workers.*

**EK:** Exactly! That will be another for my collection! At the Taj Hotel in Bombay I was told that the architect was killed, so that he did not repeat his feat!

***IP:*** *'My Name is Red' talks about this master painter who was killed so that he should not complete the painting.*

**EK:** This is part of folk literature: we have it also in Austria, for a building at Salzburg; you have it in Moscow....

***NG:*** *You have been as excited by Mughal art as by architecture. Moving away from the Taj, from the garden to the forest, you have also written on the concept of shikar, where you showed that how shikar was not merely a weekend recreation but something very firmly tied in to the Mughal notion of kingship.*

**EK:** Shikar was a recreation, but the Mughals, when confronted with the concept of *ahimsa*, felt that they had to defend it very strongly. So they represented it as something of a social duty. The hunt brings the ruler in close contact with his subjects,

takes him out and away from the palace. Thus, he interacts directly with them, and they can place their grievances before him. I once accompanied the Maharaja of Jodhpur on a hunting expedition. I saw the villagers coming to him with offerings; he would speak to them as he accepted them. So, even today, the shikar is seen as a form of interaction. The Mughals interpreted it as a form of justice, and justice was an obligation of the Muslim ruler.

Moreover, the hunt was also very important as a form of interaction between the Mughals and the Rajputs. There is a wonderful scene in the *Padshahnama* where Jahangir is attacked by a lion and a Rajput comes to his rescue, and then Khurram, the son of Jahangir, kills the lion to save the Rajput. This interaction between the indigenous ruling class, the Rajputs, and the Mughals, in the form of the hunt established an important bond between them.

A new hunting technique changed the style of painting. In earlier paintings, the chase was depicted, and landscape was not shown in much detail. The Mughals adopted a new form, an Indian form of the hunt, where the main hunter sits in camouflage, in close contact with nature, and the animals are driven to him by the decoy animals; and thus the artist carefully paints the detail, to give us a very naturalistic representation of landscape. What this implies with regard to art history is that it is important to look at the form as well as at the sociological context.

***NG:*** *How did you come to be involved in the 'Padshahnama' exhibition and its catalogue, which is now a book in its own right?*

**EK:** That was a wonderful project and, in a way, it took me away from architecture for two years. Milo Beach, then the director of the Freer and Sackler Galleries in Washington D.C. invited me to write this catalogue with him because I had been studying Shahjahani art and court culture for such a long time. As I looked at the paintings as a whole, I suddenly started seeing things which related to each other, the principles according to which they were painted. I began to understand that what worked for one painting worked also for another.

There is a linear system in the composition, and a selective use of naturalism in representing figures and other things. The most striking examples are the large durbar scenes where I noted that we are misled by the naturalist method of detail. It is, in fact, a

completely *abstract* composition, with the Emperor in the centre and in the background. So this again ties up with the bilateral symmetry that I have found in Mughal texts. For these symmetrical compositions I draw attention to the two groups of nobles shown in profile looking at each other. But this is not at all how it was. They did *not* look at each other – they looked at the *Emperor*. If they would have been shown as it really was, then they would have to show them from behind, with the emperor in frontal view, and it would have distorted the representations. According to Mughal ideas this is not something that should be done for persons of rank. So they are shown in profile. The Mughals thought along the lines of Plato, who condemned three dimensional illusionistic-representation because it doesn't show things as they are, but as they appear to the eye. We have this abstract in the profile and also in the composition, but then, within the linear system there is a microscopic naturalism and attention to detail, the painting of portraits, and we are even able to see individuals at different stages of their life, from when they were young until they were grown up. We can even follow a Mughal nobleman's ageing, so to speak, from just looking at the *Padshahnama*.

**NG:** *We have been given to understand that portraiture is something that Europeans contributed to Mughal art. Is that true?*

**EK:** The Mughals were looking very carefully at northern European painting, which was always the domain of detailed representation of the surface and of the human face versus the psychological assessment of a character.

**NG:** *What about the reception of Mughal art in Europe?*

**EK:** Yes, I have been working on an exhibition ('The Great Mughals and Europe') which, unfortunately, has not materialized so far. I wanted to do this for the Kunsthistorisches Museum, our great art museum at Vienna, but alas, because of financial reasons, it had to be cancelled. It would have shown, on the one hand, how the Mughals were systematically interested over a period of about a 100 years in Europe as a source of inspiration not only for stylistic aspects, but also for allegoric constructions to express the idea: an extremely focused form of reception.

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On the other hand in Europe, it was more haphazard, and we have seen the very interesting instance of the Schönbrunn palace at Vienna. It is symptomatic of the way Mughal art was received in Europe, because what was important was this idea of absolutist and dynastic rulership. In the West, the Mughals were seen as the prototype of Oriental rule, something of which the Europeans – the absolute rulers – were perhaps secretly dreaming! The Mughals were known as the House of Timur, and Timur was in the good books of Europe especially in Austria, because he had vanquished the Ottomans. So, in a way, this opened the doors – Mughal art appears in the decoration of the palace of Maria Theresa. Foreign art here was subjected to a very strong form of appropriation because the miniatures were cut up and pasted together. It created very intricate collages and the interesting thing is – and this is what I have been working on recently – these collages were used as a sort of inspiration for wall paintings done in the Mughal manner by an Austrian artist, the only instance I would know of where this has been done.

These were miniatures which were cut up and supplemented by the additions of this Austrian artist, perhaps a group of artists. Especially in the higher sections of the walls where there was no original material, they pasted their own additions. There is a schizophrenic quality to it. On the one hand, they were cutting up miniatures, taking figures out of it and, on the other hand, they studied them so closely that they came up with their own versions of the Mughal gardens and palaces. Also, these wall paintings speak of a very close study of Mughal miniatures. I published them in an article in the festschrift for the eminent art historian Robert Skelton, and Jerry Losty, previously of the British Library, was very critical of them, but I think they are wonderful emulations of Mughal court scenes with an Austrian touch!

**NG:** *We see the finished product – your books – we don't see all the hard work that goes into it, and the kinds of work. Can you give us some sense of that? I understand that you found the Archaeological Survey very helpful. But nonetheless it must have been very arduous.*

**EK:** One needs a lot of patience, and one needs time. When one comes as an outsider, one has to win the confidence of the Survey officials. Then, field work is not always easy, because while some

buildings are accessible, some are really out in the open, so one has to camp out, sometimes in villages. Fact-finding expeditions were difficult. But once I knew what to expect, I would go a second time, I would take Richard with me and then we would take our instruments for measuring, our cameras. It is really hard work. One is torn, on the one hand, between doing field work of an archaeological nature, and being a desk scholar on the other hand.

***NG:*** *You have built up a wonderful personal collection.*

**EK:** Yes, I have a huge archive of photographs, something like 50,000 black and white photographs and slides. I have several hundred measured drawings, which were done for me by architects working for me, in particular, Richard Barraud. I still have to publish all this! I was working on the palaces and gardens of Shahjahan, but there was a point when I could not avoid the Taj any more in order to better understand the principles of Shahjahani architecture. Now, I will go back and work on the book on the palaces, it will have at least two volumes. I have found out about 38 palaces and gardens of Shahjahan, of which 24 are still extant and of these we have newly surveyed 17! That's the largest body of such structures which exists for a single patron in South Asia and in the Muslim world.

It was a great privilege for me to work on the Taj. I see it now from the reaction, because this is a building which has the attention of the whole world. I am really grateful for having had the chance to do this book; I feel a great sense of responsibility towards it; it is an Indian monument, it is wonderful to be accepted here in India.

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