

Goddess Durga and the Annihilation of the Demon Raktabija

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Among many Hindu stories, the Devī-māhātmya was a Hindu philosophical text written in the 6th century and was presumed to be one of the most famous Hindu texts. The text consisted of numerous mythological stories describing the Goddess as one with ultimate power and creator of the universe. In chapter eight of the text, there is a portrait of the Goddess defeating the infamous Demon Raktabija. This 16.2 by 25.7cm portrait elaborately utilizes vibrant colors such as red, white, and gold, naturalism, and contrasting individuals; this style is a mix of Indian and Mughal culture within Hindu illustrations. Additionally, the portrait features the Goddess extending her tongue to catch every drop of Raktabija's blood to hinder him from generating new demons and thus, defeating him in battle. Artists also depicted the Goddess with many arms; each with its weapon to establish her great power and exemplify Raktabija as a challenging opponent. Ultimately, the folklore of the Goddess annihilating Demon Raktabija expresses the diversity within miniature paintings through contrasting figures and colors and presents how portraits can accurately depict religious and cultural beliefs.

In retrospect, the Mughal ruler Akbar the Great was well-known for being a revolutionary leader and his legacy in encouraging artistic experimentation through architecture and art. He built a workshop for artists to practice their work and develop their skills and technique in tracing.¹ He would also support artists by commissioning books that contained illustrations. Albums such as the Akbarnama consisted of countless miniature paintings that covered an extensive portion of Akbar's everyday life as a king. Others such as the Hamzanama included religious figures such as Hamza, an uncle of the prophet Muhammad, and divine deities such as Krishna and Devi. As miniature paintings became important, they required delicate attention to details; as such, some spent more than fifty days on one piece. These portraits were also collaborative work between master artists, an artist to add color, a specialist in portraiture, and

¹ Dehejia, Vidya. *Indian Art*. London: Phaidon Press, 1997, 310.

his final inspection.² In other words, Akbar's encouragement in art led to a trend of Mughal compositions of royal figures and Hindu deities as paintings became a significant medium for Hindu texts and Jain manuscripts.

Additionally, through his interest in the nuances of realism in art, Akbar also prospered in developing a new style of work that included naturalism compiled with Mughal and Hindu elements.³ His court consisted of Persian masters, two local artists, and thirteen others. Akbar required that they consistently applied a great amount of technical skill to each small work to maintain the Mughal aesthetic and attention to detail. Moreover, within the portrait of the Goddess and Raktabija resides, the implementation of human-like figures and their skin tone establishes a sense of realism. The size between the Goddess and the Demon layers a sense of perspective on a flat plane; the Goddess appears in the distance, given her small size. Moreover, the use of color appears as a blend of Indian style where foreground and characters are in bold, vibrant pigments, while background landscapes are faded.⁴ In addition to this, Durga and Raktabija are Hindu subjects, though the clothing, jewelry, and painting style appear more similar to that of the Mughal Dynasty. Needless to say, Akbar's patronage of art during his time created a unique Mughal style for the future of Hindu art and compositions.

All in all, miniature paintings had no cohesive vision until the rule of the Mughal Empire. Rulers such as Akbar, greatly influenced the artistic production of such paintings, while vivid colors came from Indian painters and artists included Mughal style and clothing while depicting Hindu subjects. Many pieces are rich and natural in composition, requiring mastery and expertise in craftsmanship, and have come to help create an optical reality that reveals insights about the

² Dehejia, Vidya. *Indian Art*, 311.

³ Dehejia, Vidya, 316.

⁴ Tola, Maya. "Artistic Patronage of Akbar the Great." *DailyArt Magazine*, October 19, 2021.

processes of the world.⁵ Succeeding Akbar's reign, the tradition of miniature paintings as a form of presenting Hindu deities and religious figures became significant and popularized.

⁵ Professor Rebecca Hall "Lecture 13" (2/15/22, Lecture for Art History 31, UCLA)

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