



The Position and Role of the Halo Motif in the Indian Mughal Style of Painting (1526-1707)

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of the halo motif in Mughal court painting from the reign of Babur (1526) to that of Aurangzeb (1707), focusing on its transformation in form, symbolism, and artistic techniques, including colour schemes and compositional design. Guided by two central research questions, it explores: *How did the visual characteristics of halos change throughout the Mughal period? And how were these changes employed to express political authority and ideological legitimacy?* Drawing on comparative analysis, historical documentation, and close visual readings of Mughal court paintings, this research traces the shift of halos from simple, religiously rooted motifs to complex symbols of divine kingship. During the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir, halos became ornate and colourful, reflecting syncretic spiritual ideals and imperial ideology. By Shah Jahan's era, their design reached peak sophistication, often mirroring the architectural elements of the Mughal court. In contrast, Aurangzeb's later reign saw a restrained use of halos, aligning with his orthodox policies. The study reveals that halos functioned not merely as decorative or sacred elements but as intentional tools for constructing and communicating power. This research contributes to our understanding of how Mughal artists used visual symbolism to reinforce dynastic identity and royal ideology across a century marked by shifting cultural and political landscapes.

Keywords: Halo of Light, Halo of Fire, Style of the Indian Mongols, Miniature¹, Islamic Era.

Article Type: Research Article²

Introduction

The study of halos in Mughal imperial portraiture is significant because this visual element carries profound symbolic meanings related to divine legitimacy, spiritual authority, and royal sanctity. Although the origin of halos can be traced back to both pre-Islamic and Islamic artistic traditions, their development and usage in Mughal painting reflect a unique synthesis of Persian, Indian, and later European influences. This research is essential for understanding how such symbolic elements were adapted within the Mughal context, how their meanings evolved, and how they contributed to the visual language of kingship. A systematic analysis of halos in Mughal painting allows for a deeper appreciation of the cultural and artistic exchanges that shaped Mughal art and its place within the broader tradition of Islamic and South Asian painting.

The halo, a significant and enduring symbol in artistic traditions across various cultures, has long been used to emphasise the sanctity and authority of gods, kings, and revered figures. Originating in Indian art, particularly within Buddhist traditions of the 3rd century BCE, as seen in sculptures from Sarnath (Kang 2013: 39), the halo motif spread to Byzantium through cultural and artistic exchanges. In Indian art, halos are predominantly associated with divine figures, symbolising their spiritual authority and sacredness, often appearing in the iconography of Hindu deities and royal figures (Parameswaran

¹The authors recommended using Persian painting according to Iranian art and culture.

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and Cardoza 2009:19). Similarly, in Byzantine art, halos serve as markers of holiness and divine favour, typically rendered as circular or square forms encircling the heads of sacred figures, with colours enhancing their symbolic depth (Soykan and Açıkgöz 2024: 383). The transmission of the halo from India to Byzantium highlights a broader cultural exchange, where divine light elevates the status of both gods and rulers, linking them to celestial realms (Topaloğlu and Kılıç 2024: 41).

Throughout religious history, the halo, or aura of light, has held significant meaning in the visual arts, serving as a focal point to highlight the sanctity of specific figures. Rooted in both religious symbolism and philosophical foundations, the halo recurs as a visual element from ancient to contemporary periods. The Oxford Dictionary defines a halo as “a circle of light shown around or above the head of a holy person,” encapsulating its association with divinity and reverence. The sun, venerated as a deity since the Indo-European migrations, became central to Mithraism, an independent religion emerging from solar worship. Mithra, an Indo-Iranian deity, embodied the sun’s power and enigma, with the halo symbolising divine and superhuman attributes (Sick 2004: 432). In many ancient religions, including Judaism and Christianity, light serves as a metaphor for divine presence and truth, a theme that transcends cultural boundaries and underscores the halo’s universal significance. The earliest known use of the halo can be traced to ancient Egypt, around 3000 BCE, in depictions of the Hapis cow, symbolising the sun’s unattainable celestial authority (Sick 1996: 257; Hartwig 2014: 92). Scholars suggest the concept of the aura was transmitted from Egypt to Greece, Rome, and Byzantium, evolving in form and meaning. In Egyptian iconography, sacred animals often bear cosmic symbols above their heads, representing celestial bodies, similar to Sasanian crowns (see Table. 1, Row 5). This transmission occurred in two phases: first, through solar worship among Aryan peoples, and second, through Mithraism, where Mithras, as Sol Invictus, integrated solar symbolism into Roman iconography (Polat and Altunkanat 2024: 361; Rivera 2018: 57–67).

The statistical population of the present study comprises over 120 portrait paintings depicting Mughal emperors from Babur to Aurangzeb, sourced from various museums and collections worldwide. For analysis, only those works that explicitly feature a halo motif have been selected. To date, these

visual materials have not been systematically compiled or comprehensively studied within a single academic framework or museum archive. References to the halo motif in existing scholarly literature are limited, often brief, and scattered across diverse sources. Therefore, this study represents one of the first attempts to categorise and examine the representation of halos in Mughal imperial portraiture in a focused and methodical manner. The statistical population primarily comprises miniatures from royal albums¹ attributed to Jahangir and Shah Jahan, with sources including museum websites, such as the British Library (e.g., Add. MS 20734), the Victoria and Albert Museum (e.g., IS.2:1-1896), and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This research addresses the following questions: How did the halo motif in Mughal portraiture evolve in form, symbolism, and artistic techniques (colour/design) from Babur to Aurangzeb? And how did they reflect the political and ideological legitimacy of emperors and other figures?






By examining these questions, this research aims to elucidate the halo’s adaptability and symbolic power in Mughal art, highlighting its role as a bridge between spiritual, royal, and cultural narratives, while underscoring the dynamic nature of Islamic art in synthesising diverse influences within a distinctive Mughal identity.

Historical Evolution and Symbolism of the Halo

The halo, an enduring symbol of divinity and authority, has been a prominent motif across ancient civilisations, with its origins deeply rooted in the Indian subcontinent. From the earliest times, Aryan cultures instilled a reverence for the sun (Fatemi 1968: 417), making India one of the first regions to showcase the halo, or aura of light, in its artistic traditions. The history of the halo can be divided into several key phases, each reflecting its evolution across cultures, religions, and artistic styles, culmi-

¹The royal albums of the Mughal school in India were first compiled at the end of Akbar Shah’s reign, following his personal order. Akbar commanded artists to paint portraits of all the courtiers, thereby immortalising them. This tradition of creating albums continued during the reigns of his successors. Jahangir not only included portraits of court figures but also added illustrations of animals and plants, all painted under his patronage. As a result, the finest examples of album painting in the Mughal school of India were produced during the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan. The practice of creating such illustrated albums can be traced back to Iran and the time of Shah Tahmasp.

Table 1: Early Representations of Halos Across Ancient Cultures

Rows	1	2	3	4	5
Aura motif					
culture	Mitra (Ardeshir II Coronation) Sassanid period	Mitra (next to Antiochus), Seleucid period	Mithraic ritual in the Roman Empire	Helios, the Greek sun god	The sacred bull of Hapis, Egypt
References	(After: Javadi 2021:42)	(After: Todorova 2020: 124)	(After: Adrych et al. 2017:98)	(After: The British Museum, London)	(After: The Louvre, Paris, France)

nating in its sophisticated use in Mughal art. Below is a structured overview of its development:

Origins in Early Indian Art

Buddhist Influence: The earliest representations of the halo motif appear in Buddhist art at around the 3rd century BCE, notably in sculptures from Sarnath. Here, halos signify the divine nature of the Buddha and other significant figures (Kang 2013: 39). Typically depicted as circular discs or radiating lines, these halos symbolise enlightenment and spiritual authority. For example, coins discovered at the Jalalabad Stupa (British Museum, IOC.123) showcase the Buddha encircled by a simple halo, reflecting divine light and karmic warmth in Indian religious thought (Fynes 2015: 154).

Aryan Roots: The halo's origins are also linked to pre-Aryan and Aryan beliefs, wherein celestial light was associated with divinity. Vedic texts frequently reference light in relation to deities, such as Agni, the god of fire, who manifests as the sun in the sky, lightning in the atmosphere, and fire on earth (Bolkhari Ghoo 2016: 17). This tripartite symbolism laid the conceptual groundwork for the halo's artistic representations.

Influence of Other Cultures

Indo-Iranian Art: As Indian art evolved, it absorbed influences from Iranian and Central Asian traditions through trade, migration, and cultural exchange. The Zoroastrian concept of *Farah* or *khavarna*, symbolising divine glory, influenced halo depictions, particularly during the Sasanian period (Moshtagh Khorasani *et al.* 2020: 145–183). For instance, Sasanian reliefs at Taq-e Bostan depict kings with radiant halos, reflecting divine legitimacy.

Hellenistic Influence: Following Alexander the Great's invasion in the 4th century BCE, Hellenistic art introduced stylistic elements, such as more naturalistic halo designs, which influenced Indian depictions of divine figures. This blending is evident in Gandharan art, where Buddha statues combine Greek realism with Indian spiritual symbolism (Huntington 1990: 401).

Hinduism and Jainism

Hindu Iconography: In Hindu art, halos emphasise the divine radiance and purity of gods, goddesses, and saints. Temple sculptures, such as the 7th-century statue of Ganga at Mahabalipuram (Muthi'ah *et al.* 2021: 18–25), feature deities adorned with elaborate halos decorated with lotus, artichoke leaves, or ivy, resembling Sasanian decorative motifs. These designs denote divine qualities and cosmic order, with the lotus symbolising emergence and beauty (Bolkhari Ghoo 2005: 16).

Jain Art: Jain art adopts halos to signify the transcendental nature of Tirthankaras. For example, 9th-century Jain sculptures at Ellora feature geometric halos, symbolising spiritual purity and enlightenment (Parikh 2015: 215–236).

The Mughal Period

Emergence of the Halo in Mughal Art: During the Mughal era, the halo motif became prominent in court paintings, particularly in the portraiture of emperors from Babur to Aurangzeb.

Cultural Synthesis: Mughal art synthesised Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic motifs, creating a unique visual language. Halos in Mughal art often incorporated intricate designs, such as floral patterns, reflecting the influence of Persian miniatures and Indian lotus iconography (Koch 2001: 45). This

fusion underscored the sanctity of rulers and their connection to divine authority, with halo sizes varying to distinguish emperors from crown princes or allied rulers.

Zoroastrian and Manichaean Influences

The concept of Farah in Zoroastrianism, representing divine light bestowed upon the virtuous, profoundly influenced halo iconography. This is evident in Sasanian art, where kings are depicted with radiant halos symbolising khavarna (Soykan and Açıkgöz 2024: 383). Zoroastrian dualism, emphasising the struggle between light and darkness, also shaped Manichaean art, where halos represented the soul's spiritual journey toward light (Arjomand 2022: 219). During the Sasanian period, the prophet Mani's travels to the Indus Valley introduced Manichaean elements to Indian art, enriching halo designs with intricate plant motifs (Prasetyo 2019: 59; Sahaji 2025: 69).

Cultural and Artistic Exchanges

The evolution of the halo reflects extensive cultural exchanges. The wheel, which is a Sumerian invention symbolising the sun, was likely introduced to India through Persian intermediaries. This led to its integration into Buddhist iconography as a solar motif (Rose 2014: 29). The lotus, a symbol shared by both Iranian and Indian cultures, appears in halo designs, with its petals resembling rays of sunlight (Bolkhari Ghoooh 2005: 16). For example, a 15th-century Buddha statue at Sarnath (Archaeological Survey of India, Sarnath Museum) features a halo adorned with lotus motifs, symbolising spiritual energy and cosmic order (Kang 2013: 75). These designs exhibit striking similarities to Sasanian pillar capitals, highlighting the synthesis of local and external traditions (Moshtagh Khorasani *et al.* 2020: 145–183).

The Position of the Halo of Light in the Indian Mughal Style

The halo, a luminous aura symbolising a fundamental power of existence, is deeply rooted in Hindu philosophy as *Prana*, which refers to an energy field that encompasses humans, animals, plants, and even inanimate objects (Webster 2010: 10). This concept was prominent among mystics and saints during the Middle Ages and underscores the interconnectedness of all entities through a shared energetic essence. Auras are characterised by fixed and variable colours: the fixed colour reflects an indi-

vidual's general personality, while the variable colour fluctuates with mental and physical states, such as happiness, sadness, or illness (Thomas 2021: 10). In artistic representations, particularly in Mughal portraiture, these auras manifest as halos, capturing the spiritual and moral qualities of figures. Virtuous individuals may be depicted with luminous halos, while spiritually advanced figures exhibit larger, more radiant ones. Halos assume various geometric shapes—circles symbolising wholeness, triangles denoting support, and stars representing the soul's potential—enriched by symbols like arrows, crosses, and crescent moons, each reflecting specific cultural and spiritual meanings (Beach 1987: 66–75).

Auras encompass a spectrum of colours, each carrying distinct symbolic meanings. An orange aura signifies efficiency, dynamism, and harmony, characterising forgiving and humble individuals. A green aura represents peace, cooperation, and generosity, embodying balance and compassion. The rare white aura is associated with holy and philanthropic individuals who prioritise others' well-being, reflecting profound wisdom. The golden aura, considered the most powerful, is attributed to those who have achieved significant goals, and is often depicted around saints and clerics in religious art to symbolise authority and divine favour (Thomas 2021: 66–75). In Islamic mysticism, Ala' al-Dawla Simnani likened the seven layers of luminous auras—ethereal physical, cosmic, lower mental, upper mental, spiritual, illumination, and absolute—to the spiritual anatomy of an enlightened individual, each layer corresponding to subtle organs and the positions of seven great prophets (Carbon 2004:69). In Iranian paintings, these colourful lights illustrate spiritual elevation, drawing from historical myths and traditions to convey a "sacred aura." In Indian, Manichaean, and Christian art, colours such as gold, green, and red reflect various levels of spiritual attainment, symbolising divine connection and enlightenment.

In the Indian subcontinent, particularly during the Mughal Empire, halos were adapted to reflect Islamic, Persian, and Indian influences, often depicted as flames, circles of light, or lotus flowers. The Mughal style, rooted in Iranian and Central Asian traditions, was shaped by the cultural exchanges initiated by Babur (reigned 1526–1530), the founder of the Mughal Empire. Babur's interest in the arts laid the foundation for Mughal painting, which flourished under his son Humayun (reigned 1530–1540,

1555–1556). During his exile in Iran, Humayun was exposed to Safavid art and returned to India with Iranian master artists Mir Sayyid Ali and Abd al-Samad, who established the Mughal painting workshop in 1555 (Craven 1986: 220–224). Their influence is evident in manuscripts like the *Hamzanama* (Victoria and Albert Museum, IS.2:1-1896), where vibrant halos are prominently featured.

During Akbar's reign (1556–1605), the Mughal artistic style reached its zenith, synthesising Iranian, Indian, and later European elements. Akbar managed a workshop that employed approximately one hundred artists, primarily Hindus under Iranian supervision, who produced masterpieces documented in manuscripts such as the *Akbarnama* (British Library, Add. MS 20734, folio 56) and the *Baburnama* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 55.121.10). Akbar's interest in religion led to the establishment of Din-

i Ilahi, a syncretic faith that influenced artistic expressions, including the use of halos to signify spiritual and political legitimacy (Stronge 2002: 67). Portraits of Babur and Humayun, often produced during the reigns of their descendants, feature circular "ring-type" halos. These halos are sometimes plain with a luminous band, to honour their foundational roles in the Mughal dynasty. Additionally, these halos, reflecting Persian influences, often use golden hues to symbolise prosperity and divine approval (Koch 2001: 45).

After examining over 120 portrait paintings of Mughal emperors, from Babur to Aurangzeb, we have selected works featuring a halo motif and analysed the halos associated with each emperor individually.

According to Table. 2, among the portrait-style images, only one depiction of Emperor Babur fea-

Table.2: Early Gurkan kings before Akbar

Rows	Image	Emperor	Halo Form	Halo Colour	Notes	Reference
1		Babur	Circular	Green	A simple circular halo	(After: Louvre Museum, Paris, OA 7156)
2		Humayun	Circular	Green	The halo is a solid circular green form without any rays.	(After: The Late Shah Jahan Album, c.1650)
3		Humayun	Circular	Green and background colour	The halo consists of two overlapping circles with long	(After: Royal Collection Trust, ©king Chares III)
4		Humayun	Circular	Green and gold	A circular halo from which scattered rays of light radiate outward.	(After: The Royal Collection Trust)
5		Humayun	Ring-shaped	Gold	A narrow ring composed of radiant light beams.	(After: Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

tures a solid green circular halo (Row 1). This halo is represented as a simple circle without any radiant beams.

In Row 2, the halo surrounding Humayun's head is more intricate. It consists of a green central circle encircled by a larger, linear ring, with faint, thin rays of light radiating outward. These rays are difficult to discern due to their similarity in colour to the background. Row 3 presents another circular halo associated with Humayun. This halo is green and surrounded by dense, yellowish rays that subtly fade into the surrounding space. These glowing emanations bear a striking resemblance to modern telescope photographs of the sun's burning surface. The image in Row 4, also depicting Humayun, features a ring-shaped halo that matches the background colour, but with a distinct, tightly packed band of golden rays forming a perfectly circular pattern. Due to its structured and ring-like appearance, it has been classified accordingly. Finally, the image in Row 5 displays a simple, golden-coloured circular halo positioned behind Humayun's head.








The study of portraiture during the Mughal period, particularly the works associated with Emperor Akbar, highlights his pioneering role in establishing the visual and artistic traditions of this era. As one of the most prominent rulers of the Mughal dynasty, Akbar significantly influenced the political and social domains while playing a crucial role in shaping and developing distinctive artistic styles. One notable technique in his portraits is the use of luminous halos, which appear to be an innovative and symbolic element, reflecting a deliberate effort to construct a unique visual identity for the emperors of this period. While some scholars attribute the introduction of the halo motif to the reign of Emperor Jahangir (Verma 1999: 67; Beach 1992: 113; Moin 2014: 69), imperial portraiture probably began to flourish toward the end of Akbar's reign. At that time, the use of halos had not yet fully developed or diversified, and was limited to only a few miniatures. Although some halos depicted in portraits of Akbar may date back to, or have been completed during, the reign of Jahangir, it is possible that a few surviving examples were created during Akbar's own time, perhaps existing merely as preliminary sketches. Referring to Table 3 and the first artwork in Row 1, the halo is illustrated as a bright, golden spherical form surrounded by dense rays of light. These rays appear both as a compact cloud-like mass and as extremely fine lines. The surface of the

circle is not uniformly coloured; it resembles a molten orb, much like the sun. In Row 2, the halo takes the form of a circular area matching the background colour, with extensive and densely concentrated luminous clouds radiating outward across a broader space. These radiant beams gradually fade into the surrounding space. In Row 3, we observe similar dense halos of light surrounding Emperor Akbar's head. However, unlike previous examples, these rays do not form a distinct central circular boundary but instead emanate outward from around his head. Halo No.4 is represented as a simple circle. However, since this element appears to be part of an unfinished design rather than a completed miniature, little can be concluded regarding its colour or intended final appearance. Halo No.5 looks more like a preliminary sketch than a finished work, resembling a schematic depiction of the sun: a central circle with elongated, linear rays radiating outward. Halo No.6 is a ring-shaped halo, consisting of a narrow band of radiant light encircling the head. Generally speaking, while the use of luminous halos reached its peak during the reign of Emperor Jahangir, evidence suggests that this artistic element was likely employed in a rudimentary and experimental manner toward the end of Akbar's reign as well. The halos depicted in portraits of Akbar are predominantly shown as golden circular forms, often resembling solar symbols or glowing orbs of light. These elements not only create striking visual effects but also serve as symbolic representations of majesty, sanctity, and royal authority.

Table 4 indicates that the diversity and number of halos experienced a sudden and significant increase during the reign of Emperor Jahangir. This is likely why many scholars consider his era to mark the beginning of the systematic use of head halos in the Mughal school of painting. During Jahangir's reign, halos not only became more varied in form but also transformed into one of the principal artistic elements in courtly portrait miniatures. In Row 1, we see the use of a ring-type halo with a green background for Emperor Jahangir. Row 2 features a delicate ring-shaped halo, indicating the refinement and aesthetic attention typical of this period.

Each Sasanian king was known for his own distinct crown (Jozi and Saadat-mehr 2022:45), adorned with ornamental features that included plants, animals (whole or in part), geometric patterns, and celestial constellations. Ardashir I's crown was originally adorned with pearls in the

Table 3: Halos used around Akbar Shah's head

Rows	Image	Halo Form	Halo Colour(s)	Notes	Reference
1		Circular	Golden	A circular halo with scattered yellow rays.	(After: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of Islamic Art)
2		Circular	Background colour with golden rays	A ring-shaped halo with dense and expansive light rays.	(After: The Chester Beatty Library c. 1650, India, In 07B.21b)
3		Amorphous (could be classified as circular)	Golden	This halo can also be classified as circular, consisting of compact radiant beams.	(After: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of Islamic Art)
4		Circular	Yellow	A simple yellow circular halo without rays.	(After: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Department of Islamic Art)
5		Solar	Yellow	A circular halo with long	(After: Christies, London, Art of the Islamic and Indian Worlds, Lot 294)
6		Ring-shaped	Golden	sun-like rays (solar motif).	(After: The Metropolitan Museum, 55.121.10.19)
7		Circular	Green background with golden rays	A narrow band of golden light forms a ring-shaped halo	(After: Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Num 15.41, C 17)

style of the Parthian kings, which later incorporated an orb-like element likely symbolising either the earth or the sun (Saravani *et al.* 2024: 121). In Row 3, a unique halo that combines crescent moon and solar imagery is depicted. This halo was specifically used during the reign of Jahangir and did not appear in later periods. The juxtaposition of lunar and solar motifs may have been influenced by the crowns of the Sasanian kings, while also possibly symbolising the coexistence of lunar and solar energies, or night and day, within a single luminous halo. Nevertheless, this is one of the most distinctive halos from Jahangir's period, notable for encompassing the upper torso of the emperor rather than merely surrounding his head.

Row 4 features a halo shaped like a full sun motif, similarly covering Jahangir's upper body. Rows 5 and 6 both display circular halos; Row 5 showcases an empty circle with fine, elongated rays of light radiating outward, while Row 6 presents a simple, yellow-coloured circle. Row 7 stands out due to its pale cream colour, which appears to represent the moon, differing from the previous solar motif. In Row 8, a ring-shaped halo with a green base and a golden band along its edge appears. Rows 9 and 10 again feature solar motifs, one with longer and more pronounced rays, while the other shows finer and more extended rays. Row 11, like Row 12, depicts a circular halo filled with a dense arrangement of radiant beams, with some being linear and others compact and cloud-like. In Row 13, tightly packed rays encircle Jahangir's head. Rows 14, 15, and 16 continue to exhibit the trend of circular halos in various forms, demonstrating the richness and variety of this artistic motif during the period. This extensive use and formal variation of halos under Jahangir underscore their growing importance as visual and symbolic devices in Mughal portraiture. They reflect broader cultural influences, including earlier Persianate traditions such as Sasanian royal iconography, while also establishing new conventions within the Mughal artistic canon. A study of luminous halos during the reign of Emperor Jahangir reveals that this period marked a pivotal turning point in the development and evolution of visual traditions in Mughal portraiture. The significantly increased diversity and number of halos transformed this artistic element into one of the central components of courtly portrait miniatures. These innovations demonstrate a deliberate effort to create distinctive visual effects and convey deeper cultural

and political meanings. The frequent use of gold as a dominant colour in halos reinforces its symbolic significance, representing majesty, wealth, and sanctity. The emergence of cream-coloured halos, symbolising lunar light, further demonstrates the richness and aesthetic diversity that characterised this period. It is important to note that halos during Jahangir's reign were not limited to Mughal emperors; they also adorned other prominent political figures. This is particularly evident in the joint portraits of Jahangir and Shah Abbas, where halos serve as powerful symbols of authority and political alliance. Over time, halos evolved from a simple decorative motif into a key element of imperial Mughal painting. This transformation underscores the growing importance of the halo as a visual device for articulating royal identity, divine legitimacy, and sovereign status within the Mughal artistic and ideological framework.

Artists during Shah Jahan's era fully embraced the artistic achievements that had flourished during the reign of Emperor Jahangir. The halo motif, in particular, took on a significant role in court portraiture, evolving into a refined and symbolically rich visual device. For instance, a miniature in Row 1 of Table 5 depicts Shah Jahan paying homage to his father, Jahangir, with both figures shown wearing radiant golden halos. This representation not only emphasises their royal status but also highlights the continuity of divine authority across generations. Halo No.2 is a simple golden circle, while Halo No. 3 features a solar motif and appears in a painting of the young Shah Jahan alongside his father, both portrayed with sun-like halos. This underscores the symbolic connection between the ruling lineage and celestial power. Halo No.4 consists of a circular form with delicate rays of light radiating outward. Halo No. 5 is a solid golden circle filled with smaller concentric circles, creating a polished, reflective appearance. On its left side, small star-like points of light are visible, enhancing its luminous effect. Halo No.6, uniquely named "Rainbow" in this study, showcases a multicoloured composition. At its centre lies a yellow sun, from which layers of colour radiate outward, gradually fading into blue at the edges. Dense clouds surround the halo, with angels positioned at the ends of these clouds. Two central angels hold flames, suggesting that the source of light surrounding Shah Jahan is divine and heavenly in nature, bestowed by God. Rows seven and eight feature ring-shaped halos with green and

Table 4: Halos used around Jahangir Shah's head



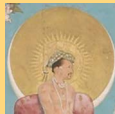






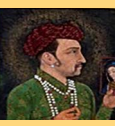


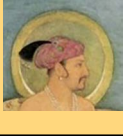



Rows	Image	Halo Form	Halo Colour(s)	Notes	Reference
1		Ring-shaped	Green and gold	Two overlapping circles; the central circle is light green	(After: Smithsonian Institution, S1986.407)
2		Ring-shaped	Golden	A very fine and narrow golden ring-shaped halo.	(After: National Museum of Asian Art, F1942.16a)
3		Solar-lunar	Golden and white	A large circular halo with a solar motif at the centre and a crescent moon placed along its lower curve.	(After: National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C.)
4		Solar	Golden	A sun motif with an empty centre.	(After: Los Angeles County Museum of Art)
5		Circular	Golden	A circular halo with short	(After: The Royal Collection of the British Royal Family, RCIN 1005925a)
6		Circular	Yellow	A simple yellow circular halo without rays.	(After: Louvre Museum, ca. 1617-20)
7		Circular (lunar-like)	Cream-coloured	A cream-coloured circular halo resembling the moon.	(After: National Museum of Asian art)
8		Ring-shaped	Green and gold	Two overlapping circles; the inner circle is yellow	(After: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Museum für Islamische Kunst, Um1620)
9		Solar	Golden	A sun motif with fine	(After: The Trustees of the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, CBL In 07A5)
10		Solar	Golden	A sun motif with long	(After: The lost gallery)
11		Circular	Golden	A circular halo with dense but less visible rays.	(After: Cleveland Museum of art 2013,329)

Table 4: Halos used around Jahangir Shah's head(Continue)

Rows	Image	Halo Form	Halo Colour(s)	Notes	Reference
12		Circular	Golden	A circular halo with radiant beams diffusing into space.	(National Musume of Asian Art , Smithsonian Institution, Purchased from Francois Mautin)
13		Circular	Green with a golden band	A circular halo with a green background and a golden outer band.	(The Metropolitan Museum, 55.121.10.19)
14		Amorphous	Golden	The general form is circular due to the radiating beams	(National Museum of India, 58.58/31)
15		Amorphous	Golden	The general form is circular due to the radiating beams, but its undefined and cloud-like edges place it in the amorphous category.	(Rampur Raza Library, 1618-20 CE)
16		Ring-shaped	Green and gold	Two overlapping circles; the central circle is light green	(The David Collection, 20/1979)

blue centres, encircled by narrow golden or yellow bands. In Rows nine and ten, there are circular halos with backgrounds matching the overall tone of the image, one surrounded by dense beams of light, while the other by short and long linear rays. Row eleven presents a halo resembling the appearance of the sun on wooden surfaces. It remains unclear whether this pattern was carved into the throne behind Shah Jahan or if the artist simply rendered a subtle halo around his head. Rows twelve to fourteen include a plain golden circle and two fine light rings, respectively. Row fifteen features another simple golden halo. The halo in Row sixteen is distinctive to Shah Jahan's period; it is a plain golden circle whose luminous trail extends upward into the sky, connecting with angelic figures. For this feature, it has been named the "Comet Halo" in this research. Row seventeen displays a delicate, bright golden ring, while Row eighteen features a circular halo with a green background and dense golden rays radiating outward. In Row nineteen, we see a radiant golden solar halo, and in Row twenty, the halo takes the form of a simple yellow circle, accompa-

nied by a thin surrounding band from which evenly spaced light rays emanate. This outer band is thinner than the main body of the halo. These diverse representations of halos during Shah Jahan's reign reflect a high level of artistic maturity and symbolic complexity. The halo evolved beyond a mere decorative element, becoming a powerful visual metaphor for divine kingship, spiritual legitimacy, and political continuity- all deeply rooted in the ideological and aesthetic framework of Mughal court art. Generally speaking, the use of halos in painting during Shah Jahan's era underwent significant transformations compared to earlier periods. These changes are evident not only in the form and design of halos but also in their meaning and function. During Shah Jahan's reign, halos took on unique forms, such as the rainbow halo, the comet-shaped halo, and the radiant golden halo, reflecting a heightened emphasis on the sacred and divine aspects of kingship. This evolution demonstrates a deliberate artistic effort to visually convey the spiritual legitimacy and celestial authority of the ruler. By incorporating symbolic elements such as the sun, light, and an-

gels, halos became powerful visual metaphors for divine favour and cosmic order. The frequent use of bright golden hues in halos served as a symbol of majesty, wealth, and divine status, significantly enhancing the symbolic value of this motif in Mughal court art. Conversely, some older styles, such as the combined solar-lunar halos utilised during Jahan-gir's reign, fell out of favour in Shah Jahan's time, indicating a shift in ideological focus and aesthetic preference. Artists of Shah Jahan's period built upon the artistic achievements of previous eras while in-

novating new styles and symbols that better aligned with the cultural, political, and religious context of their time. Halos evolved from being mere markers of royal status to tools for expressing deeper concepts such as holiness, celestial connection, and divine legitimacy of rule. These artistic developments highlight the role of visual art as a key instrument in reinforcing the ruling ideology and establishing a distinctive visual identity for Shah Jahan's era, which emphasised grandeur, spirituality, and centralised imperial authority.

Table. 5: Halos used around Shah Jahan's head

Rows	Image	Halo Form	Halo Colour(s)	Notes	Reference
1		Circular	Golden	A circular halo with dense rays of light forming a ring-like effect around the circle.	(After: The Royal Collection of the British royal family , RCIN 1005925al)
2		Circular	Golden	A simple golden circular halo without additional elements.	(After: Trustees of the British Museum)
3		Ring-shaped	Golden	A wide, golden ring-shaped halo surrounds the head.	(After: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, c.1630)
4		Circular	Golden	A circular halo with a very fine and narrow outline.	(After: Victori and Albert Museum, London)
5		Circular	Golden	A simple golden circle containing another smaller circular motif within it.	(After: Victoria and Albert Museum, ca 1628)
6		Rainbow (Multicoloured)	Multicoloured (from yellow to blue)	Begins as a ring-shaped form and ends with dense cloud-like rays; colour transitions from yellow to blue tones.	(After: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1630-50)
7		Ring-shaped	Green and golden	Central area is green	(After: Metropolitan Museum of Art,num-13.228.48)
8		Ring-shaped	Blue and golden	The centre matches the background colour and appears blue; it is encircled by a thin golden band representing radiant light.	(After: Metropolitan Museum of Art,MS.45.2007)

Table 5: Halos used around Shah Jahan's head(Continue)

Rows	Image	Halo Form	Halo Colour(s)	Notes	Reference
9		Circular	Background colour with golden rays	A circular form matching the background colour	(Victoria and Albert Museum, London, ca 1630, IM.17-1925)
10		Circular	Golden	The central area matches the background	(Freer and Sackler Gallery of Art, Washington DC)
11		Circular	Golden	A circular halo composed of both short and long linear rays.	(Bodleian Libraries)
12		Circular	Golden	A plain and simple circular halo.	(Royal Collection Trust, f.147b)
13		Ring-shaped	Golden	A narrow golden ring.	(After: Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, AKM135)
14		Ring-shaped	Golden	A delicate and thin golden ring.	(After: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, c. 1620)
15		Circular	Golden	A simple circular halo in form.	(After: Royal Collection Trust, 1635 AD)
16		Comet-shaped	Golden and yellow	A simple circular halo with a cloud-like tail extending toward the sky.	(After: National Museum of Asian Art, ca. 1640)
17		Ring-shaped	Bright golden	A fine and narrow golden ring with high luminosity.	(After: Metropolitan Museum of Art, South and south East Asia Collection, IM.18.1925)
18		Circular	Golden	A circular halo with fine and densely packed light rays.	(After: Royal Art Collection, Library in Dublin)
19		Solar	Golden	A golden circular halo with long	(After: Royal Art Collection, Library in Dublin, circa 1645)
20		Circular	Yellow	A simple yellow circular halo with rays of light arranged in a band-like formation along its edge.	(After: San Diego Museum of Art, 1990.0352)

During the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb, there was a general decline in artistic production within the Mughal court; however, luminous halos continued to appear in Mughal court paintings, albeit in a more restrained and symbolic manner. Unlike earlier rulers such as Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan, whose portraits often featured elaborate and radiant halos reflecting imperial grandeur and spiritual syncretism, Aurangzeb's depictions typically present simpler, more subdued versions, frequently in shades of green (Table. 6). This increased use of green likely reflects its strong cultural and religious significance in Islamic tradition, where it symbolises paradise, piety, and divine favour. Given Aurangzeb's deeply religious persona and his emphasis on orthodox Sunni Islam, this chromatic choice aligns with the broader ideological tone of his rule.

While court painting did not flourish as it had in the past, royal ateliers remained operational to some extent, producing notable portraits that reflected Aurangzeb's austere image. The emperor was frequently depicted in devotional or martial contexts, such as engaged in prayer, reciting the Quran, or wearing armour, reinforcing his identity as a pious and disciplined ruler. Nevertheless, halos continued to be depicted around his head, maintaining their role as visual markers of royal status and spiritual sanctity.

Analysis of extant portraits reveals a variety of halo designs used during Aurangzeb's reign. These include delicate ring-shaped halos (Row 1), circular forms that match the background colour with dense golden rays (Row 2), fine green halos with compact radiating beams (Row 3), and golden-framed ring-type halos (Row 4). Other variations feature simple circular halos with thin rays (Row 5), linear-rayed halos (Row 6), plain green halos (Row 7), sun motifs with wavy rays (Row 8), a rare deviation from earlier straight-rayed solar imagery, cloud-like light masses (Row 9), and densely rayed circular halos (Row 12).

Overall, the continued use of halos under Aurangzeb indicates the persistence of this motif as a tool for conveying royal legitimacy and religious sanctity, even amid broader shifts in artistic practice. However, the designs largely followed earlier stylistic conventions without introducing significant innovations in form or meaning. This artistic conservatism can be attributed to the political, cultural, and religious transformations of the time, which prioritised orthodoxy over creative experimenta-







tion. The prominence of green in halo design further underscores the era's emphasis on religious symbolism, while minor deviations, such as the wavy-rayed sun motif, suggest subtle attempts to distinguish this period from its predecessors within a generally conservative framework.

After the tradition of using luminous halos became established in Mughal painting during the reigns of the great Mughal emperors, this artistic convention was also extended to royal princes, particularly those designated as crown princes. The practice of depicting princes with halos began during the reign of Emperor Jahangir, notably appearing in portraits of Prince Khurram, who later ascended the throne as Shah Jahan. Thus, it became acceptable not only for the reigning monarch but also for prominent royal heirs to be portrayed with halos around their heads. Even when the crown prince appeared alongside the emperor in the same composition, he could still be shown with a halo, signifying his elevated status and future claim to the throne. This visual strategy reinforced the legitimacy and semi-divine status of the heir apparent within the framework of Mughal political and ideological representation. This expansion of the halo motif to include princes reflects the growing importance of royal iconography in Mughal art, as well as the desire to visually emphasise the divine and regal status of the entire royal lineage. The continuity of this tradition from Jahangir to Shah Jahan and beyond underscores its enduring symbolic significance in representing Mughal authority and legitimacy.

In the Mughal artistic tradition of India, halos of light were occasionally employed to depict political figures, particularly kings from allied or friendly nations. A notable example of this practice is found in the works commissioned by Jahangir. After dreaming of Shah Abbas Safavid, Jahangir instructed his painters to render this vision in a painting. In these artworks, both Jahangir and Shah Abbas are portrayed with halos of light, symbolising their elevated status.

In the first row of Table 7, a complex composition of halos is depicted, featuring annular, solar, and circular forms rendered in golden tones. Two angels, shown with their wings, support a large, shared halo, adding a celestial dimension to the imagery. In contrast, the second row features a more delicate circular halo, suggesting Jahangir's intent to convey a sense of equality between himself and Shah Abbas. However, the first row subtly undermines this



Table 6: Halos around Aurangzeb's head

Rows	Image	Halo Form	Halo Colour(s)	Notes	Reference
1		Ring-shaped	Golden	A very fine and narrow golden ring.	(After: The San Diego Museum of Art, circa 1650)
2		Circular	Golden	A circular halo with dense rays of light; the centre matches the background colour.	(After: Indo-Islamic Heritage Centre)
3		Circular	Green and golden	A green circular halo matching the background	(After: Royal Collection Trust, c. 1675–1700)
4		Ring-shaped	Golden	The centre of the halo matches the background colour	(After: Welch 1963: 112)
5		Circular	Golden	A circular form matching the background colour	(After: The Cleveland Museum of Art, CA 1658)
6		Circular	Dark green and golden	A dark green circular halo with regular	(After: Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, In 34.7)
7		Circular	Green	A simple circular halo in light green or turquoise colour.	(After: Dalrymple 2009: 45)
8		Solar	Yellow	A sun motif with wavy (undulating) rays of light, an unusual variation compared to straight-rayed solar halos.	(After: The British Library, Johanson Album, 3.4)
9		Circular	Yellow and golden	A simple circular form surrounded by a dense glow of yellow light.	(After: The State Meusum Berlin, No 0486561)
10		Circular	Dark golden	A dark-toned circular halo with bright	(After: The Cleveland Museum of Art, ca 1700)

notion, as Jahangir is depicted on a larger scale than Shah Abbas, while the second row presents a more balanced representation. In the third row, where Shah Abbas is portrayed alone, a circular halo with dense and continuous radii is used, further accentuating his prominence and significance. This variation in the depiction of halos reflects the nuanced ways in which Mughal artists conveyed political relationships and hierarchies, blending symbolism with artistic innovation. The inclusion of halos for foreign rulers not only highlights the diplomatic ties between the Mughal Empire and its allies but also underscores the adaptability and richness of Mughal iconography.

motif that appears to have been inspired by Western artistic traditions. This reflects the Mughal Empire's engagement with diverse cultural and religious influences. For Hazrat Maryam (Row 3), a circular halo is employed, set against a background of dense, spiral lines rendered in gold. This intricate design highlights her sanctity and enhances her spiritual significance within the composition. The depiction of Mu'in al-Din Chishti, a revered Sufi saint who held considerable influence in Akbar Shah's court and played a pivotal role during Jahangir's reign, further illustrates the use of halos for religious figures. In this image (Row 4), the halo is ring-shaped, blending with the background colour and featuring

Table 7: Use of aura for foreign political figures

Rows	Image	King's name	Form	Colour	Details	Reference
1		Jahangir and Shah Abbas	Annular Solar Circular	Golden	Using a common aura for two characters, this aura can be classified as a solar aura, with the difference that two other circles are used to emphasise it, as if two angels are carrying them.	(After: Washington, D.C: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution)
2		Jahangir and Shah Abbas	Annular	Background	Similar haloes were applied for both kings	(After: National Museum of Asian Art, F1942.16a)
3		Shah Abbas	Annular	Background	Although the halo is a ring, it is seen as a band due to the density of light rays.	(After: British Museum, collection; W_1920-0917-0-44)

During the Gurkanian (Mughal) era, religious figures were frequently depicted with auras of light, reflecting the fusion of spiritual and artistic traditions. For example, during the reign of Akbar Shah, the *Hamza Nameh*, a manuscript illustrating the adventures of Hazrat Hamza (the uncle of the Prophet Muhammad), was created. In this work, Hazrat Hamza is portrayed with a fiery halo, as seen in Table 8, Row 1. This use of a fire aura, rather than a traditional light halo, is characteristic of the Safavid artistic style. The artist responsible for this painting, Mir Seyyed Ali, was a prominent figure in the Safavid School who migrated to India with Humayun, bringing stylistic influences from Persian art. In Row 2, Jesus is depicted with a rainbow halo, a

long, delicate rays of light. This portrayal not only underscores the saint's spiritual authority but also demonstrates the Mughal artists' ability to adapt and innovate within the tradition of halo iconography. These examples highlight the Mughal artists' skilful integration of diverse artistic and religious influences, creating a rich visual language that celebrated both imperial and spiritual figures. The use of halos for religious personalities during this period reflects the Mughal Empire's broader cultural and religious syncretism, as well as its commitment to artistic excellence.

A study of luminous halos in Mughal Indian painting reveals profound and significant transformations in the use of this artistic element, which are

rooted in Illuminationist-Neoplatonic philosophy. Within this philosophical framework, every living being is regarded as a manifestation of Nur al-Anwar (Light of Lights-i.e., God), and this worldview is clearly reflected in Mughal miniature art. The use of halos not only symbolised royal status and political power but also served as a visual articulation of divine legitimacy and the sovereign's spiritual connection to the divine. The diversity and frequency of halo usage began during the reign of Emperor Jahangir and reached its peak under Shah Jahan. During Jahangir's rule, solar and lunar halos, along with cream-coloured light, became more common. These halos often extended beyond just the head, encompassing the upper torso, a clear emphasis on light as a symbolic manifestation of divine essence. Under Shah Jahan, these developments evolved into a phase of artistic innovation, marked by the emergence of unique halo types such as the rainbow halo, the comet-shaped halo, and an expanded colour palette. These halos were not merely representations of majesty and wealth; they also reinforced the king's

sacred status and his metaphysical connection to divine illumination. The Illuminationist philosophy of Abu al-Futuh Suhrawardy, along with the fascination of Mughal emperors, particularly Akbar Shah, with light, found visual expression in these miniatures. This evokes the concept of "Nur al-Anwar". This symbolism of light transcended Islamic traditions, appearing in European artistic conventions as well, reflecting a common cultural notion of divine kingship, in which the ruler embodies celestial light on Earth. In the paintings from the reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan, artists employed straightforward yet effective lighting techniques to portray the emperor as a divine-radiance bearer, emphasising his celestial and pure sovereignty. The divine nature of kingship in these works was often accentuated by the use of bright light and contrasting dark and light tones, enhancing the spiritual aura that surrounded the ruler. Thus, the halo became a powerful visual metaphor that fused political ideology, spiritual authority, and artistic innovation within the framework of Mughal court painting.

Table. 8: Use of aura for religious figures

Rows	Image	King's name	Form	Coloure	Details	Reference
1		Hamza, the uncle of the Prophet.	Flame	Golden	From the book Hamza Nameh by Mir Seyyed Ali	(After: © Trustees of the British Museum)
2		Jesus Christ	Overlapping circles	Rainbow	The sky in this painting resembles a frame and features a halo.	(After: Stanley Jones 2025:135)
3		Holy marry	Circular	Golden	The painter applies circular and spiral lines to depict the halo.	(After: Cleveland Museum of Art / CC0)
4		Mu'in al-Din Chishti	Annular	Background	Chishti was one of the nobles in Akbar Shah's court, and his aura is represented as a ring with subtle rays that evoke the sun.	(After: Chester Beatty Library, Dublin)

Conclusion

The halo motif in Indian art, likely originating in Buddhist traditions and grounded in Aryan reverence for celestial light, was profoundly shaped by centuries of interaction with Iranian art and culture, particularly Zoroastrian and Safavid influences. This study focuses on portraiture paintings from the Mughal Empire (1526–1857), depicting emperors, princes, religious figures, and allied political figures from Babur to Aurangzeb. As a religious and cultural symbol, the halo was adopted across civilisations, each infusing it with meanings aligned with their beliefs, holiness, sanctity, guidance, and divine legitimacy. In Islamic art, influenced by Zoroastrian concepts of divine glory, the halo was adapted to reflect both spiritual and political narratives.

Emerging in the 16th century, the Mughal Style blended Iranian influences with local Indian traditions, creating a unique synthesis. The halo served as a powerful visual language, articulating spiritual and ideological concepts across Buddhist, Islamic, Christian, and Sufi contexts. In Mughal portraiture, halos signified the sacred and royal status of emperors, princes, religious figures, and allied rulers. During Jahangir's reign (1605–1627), the halo became a prominent political symbol, evident in portraits of Jahangir and Shah Abbas Safavid, where shared halos underscored diplomatic alliances, though Jahangir's larger scale subtly asserted Mughal supremacy. Shah Jahan's era (1628–1658) marked the peak of halo diversity, showcasing innovative forms like rainbow and comet-shaped halos, which reflected divine kingship and the philosophical concept of Nur al-Anwar (Light of Lights). Aurangzeb's reign (1658–1707) saw a more restrained use of halos, with green hues emphasising piety and reflecting his conservative approach.

The halo's versatility is evident in its application to religious figures, such as Hazrat Hamza, depicted with a fiery halo, and Mu'in al-Din Chishti, portrayed with a ring-shaped halo that highlights their spiritual authority. Christian figures, such as Jesus and Hazrat Maryam, were depicted with rainbow and spiral-lined halos, reflecting Western influences. The selective use of halos for allied rulers, like Shah Abbas, but not for Ottoman kings, underscores their diplomatic significance. The portrayal of crown princes, such as Prince Khurram (later Shah Jahan), reinforced dynastic continuity, often depicting them alongside emperors or among courtiers with halos to signify their future royal status.

The evolution of the halo in Mughal art reflects a dynamic interplay of cultural, religious, and political influences. From simple circular forms under Akbar to diverse solar, lunar, and multicoloured designs under Jahangir and Shah Jahan, the motif symbolised holiness, royalty, and divine legitimacy. Mughal artists' experimentation with forms, colours, and techniques, drawing on Buddhist, Zoroastrian, Islamic, and Christian traditions, demonstrates their creativity and inclusivity. The halo, as a multifaceted symbol, fused political ideology, spiritual authority, and artistic innovation, leaving a lasting legacy in the history of Indian art.

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