The Mughal dynasty was founded by Babur who was a warrior and he hardly had any time to set up any court and start a studio or an atelier, but he was extremely fond of art. Babur unfortunately did not live long enough to set up a proper kingdom in India. He left it to his son Humayun. Humayun built the Taswir Khana or the great imperial studio.

Mughal paintings: their social and historical context

This is a famous painting dating back to the year 1556, now preserved in the Gulistan museum in Iran. Among the varied
and intricate details one can discern the images of a young prince showing a picture to a bearded figure donning a typical central Asian headdress. This was Humayun, the Mughal emperor and the young prince was the future emperor Akbar. Akbar at that time was barely 13 and was trying his hand at painting. This was an art that much fascinated the young prince.

He had two illustrious teachers, the Persian artists Abdur Samad and Mir Sayyid Ali. These two master painters had impressed Humayun, during his visit to the court of Shah Tamasp of Persia. In 1549 on Humayun’s invitation the two masters came to Kabul and set up on a moderate scale the famous Mughal Taswirkhana or the Imperial Studio. This in short was what scholars consider the true beginning of the Mughal Painting. Akbar’s training in art possibly never went beyond the rudiments but his future efforts in organizing the numerous talented artists under one roof was perhaps the most significant development in the history of Mughal Art.

**Mughal Painting during the reign of Emperor Jahangir**

Jahangir had a selected group of painters working under him and during his patronage Mughal Painting reached the heights of excellence.
With Jahangir, starts the most important part of the story of Mughal Painting serving as a record to the visual imagination of a patron. Jahangir was born mainly after Akbar had sent up many prayers and the birth of this son was longed for, for many years. The particular painting which shows the worth of Jahangir is a very important one in the Akbar Namah. Here we see the harem but most probably most of the figures are imagined. Though their lifelike postures and their expressions make it quite clear that this is how the world of women who guarded the infant who was to be the later king, should appear to later audience.

Jahangir was one of the most involved patrons of Mughal Painting. He claimed that he could recognize the brush stroke of each of his painters and in a way that was correct. Among his portraits are to be found a number of allegorical paintings which testify to the mythopoeiac role that he had set himself as a king.

Here we have the first painting where he is seen holding up the globe which also symbolizes his name Jahangir, ‘the world gripper’.
Jahangir commissioned the illustration of his memoir Jahangir Namah to the painter Bishandas. Unfortunately and most probably the manuscript did not take shape and many paintings were dispersed in different parts of the world.

Almost all the incidents in the life of the emperor which is considered to be important was to be recorded through painting. Just as if there was in the case when photography was discovered about royal portraiture, how portraits were to be used as a record of his empire and rule. In the same way, painting from the Jahangiri period onward recorded every incident in the life of the emperor which he thought important.

One of this was visiting the saints and conversing with learned men and poets. Jahangir himself considered that to be a very important activity and he himself was considered to be very fond of poetry and art. So both are combined in this particular painting where he is seen to be visiting the religious men.

At a late stage of his life, almost at the age of 40, Jahangir went to visit the darga of Moin-ud-din Chisti. Salim Chisti, who was the son of Moin-ud-din Chisti was the saint to whom
Jahangir’s birth was also ascribed and he had the name of the saint Salim. So his visit of Moin-ud-din Chisti’s darga was actually a homage both to his own origin and to the fact that how the Mughal dynasty venerated the Chisti saints.

In this painting we have Jahangir sitting and food is being distributed among the poor people and the darveshes are coming to visit him. This shows the excellence if the painting. The way light is being treated, the way the whole natural background is seen to emphasize the purity and the sanctity of this particular shrine. We have the darveshes who are visiting him and each portrait shows that each man has a different kind of expression. At the same time we have with the difference of clothes, gestures, the individual identity of all the holy men established. This is what the Mughal Painting was ultimately able to achieve.

It gave us as records of history that visual reality which it was impossible to get in any other medium. Here we have a detail of that painting where we see that Jahangir in having food distributed among the beggars. Each of the face of the beggars is individual portrait studies, which makes it quite clear that the Mughal artists when asked to paint a particular scene did not only pay attention to only the ruler or the
patron. His attention was given equally to even the poorest of the poor and it is through their achievement that the poor in the period of the Mughals come alive to us. We come to recognize the poor people as well as the rich people and identify them as subjects of a benevolent empire.

Jahangir was fond of symbolic and allegorical paintings that some critics attribute to the influence of European paintings brought in by Sir Thomas Roe.

In this we see his veneration for European painting and it is through the persual of the European painting that the Mughal painters actually reached that point of objective realism which was not possible for them to do before. Here we have Jahangir looking at the portrait of Mary. At the same time almost in the same stance we have Jahangir holding up the portrait of his father in which Akbar is painted in complete white and he is holding the globe which signifies his sovereignty. We must remember that Jahangir also when commissioning this painting must have remembered that he has once rebelled against his father. But what it really signifies is that the throne was to pass on to from father to son. And the law of prominature is to be observed.
Allegorical paintings during Jahangir’s reign

One of the allegorical portrays of Jahangir shows him to be shooting at poverty. The old man is supposed to symbolize poverty. The European cherubs are supplying Jahangir with arms. He is standing on a crystal globe where there is a lion and a sheep signifying the dynastic rule of the two Safavid families - one the Mughal and the Iranian. And at the bottom is a fish from whose belly emerges Manu, the Hindu law giver. Each of these symbols was carefully selected and the inscriptions write on the painting, that these were all chosen by Jahangir himself. This very important painting shows the visual ideology of the Mughal ruler as we have never been able to see in any other records that have been left by Jahangir or his biographers in this period.

There is another allegorical portrait of Jahangir where he is embracing the Shah Abbas of Iran. The background signifies the sun and moon which is a testimony to Jahangir’s name. There are the angel heads, Jahangir is standing on the lion and Shah Abbas on the sheep which are dynastic symbols of both these rulers and we find that Jahangir’s lion is almost putting Shas Abbas’s sheep out of the globe. Now this is all
supposed to signify Jahangir’s might and the control that he had over both the kingdoms.

This is the last of the iconography of Jahangir where he is giving the Quran back to the holy man from whom he was supposed to have used the crown. The three other men who are standing around his throne, are suppose to be the Sultan of Turkey, King James of England and the other man might have been the ruler of Bijapur or might be the artist himself. We have the two figures of the cupids who are crying because they cannot attack Jahangir any more. Jahangir has gone beyond time because he is sitting on the hour glass which has become his throne where the angels are writing his name. It shows that Jahangir has become immortal.

This heavily laden symbolic portrait of Jahangir shows that the Mughal rulers were quite aware of the significance of painting and that from now onwards there will be a series of these allegorical portraits which could be considered as the hallmark of royal court portraiture.

**Realistic paintings during Jahangir’s reign**

It was in the period of Jahangir that we had some of the best examples of what the Mughal artist had achieved in terms of
Realism. Here there are two works: 1) A drawing of a man called Ainayat Khan who was a courtier of Jahangir who at quite young age had succumbed to all the various kinds of addictions that he used to enjoy and when he was dying Jahangir ordered that a portrait of his be painted so that people will remember that those who are addicted to opium, wine and various other narcotics would actually come to this stage.

In this drawing we see a perfect realistic rendition of a man who is dying. His face is hollow, his eyes are looking in despair at the space in front of him, the big pillows testify to his own frailty. But all in all though a frightening picture this is one of the realistic renditions of the human figure which you can find in Mughal painting.

In this where the colors have been put in the painting subtly undergoes a change. It now becomes an allegory of death. The face of Ainayat Khan is no longer so harrowed. He is in pain which seems to have made peace with his maker. The very colorful and heavy pillows that support him though emphasize his frailty they also lend that kind of a color which makes this painting a very attractive one. It also becomes one of the most realistic renditions of the human figure that is
to be seen in color and which also goes down as one of the best examples of portraits in Mughal painting.

With these 2 drawings and paintings of Ainayat Khan Mughal painting enters a second stage of its development.

**Mughal painting during Shah Jahan**

This was painted by Vichitra when Shah Jahan was 25 and he writes it down in Shah Jahan’s own writing that ‘it is a very good likeness of me’ painted by the painter Vichitra. He is holding up the igrate with his hand which signifies that he was going to be the next king.

This is the court of Shah Jahan. His sons are brought to him by his brother-in-law Asif Khan. We have the strict hierarchy of the Mughal court maintained and it is an illustration out of the Badshah Namah which is the biography of Shah Jahan which is now reserved in the Windsor Castle Library of the Royal Property of the Kings and Queens of England. It was rarely brought out but it was one of the paintings which were shown in India in Delhi when the 50 years of Indian independence was being celebrated. It is in some way the most important symbolic painting of the Mughal period which...
shows the whole of the Mughal Empire in its glory with Shah Jahan at its head.

These are 4 portraits of 4 men who hold different occupations. It is from the period of Shah Jahan onward that portraits received a kind of finish which was to be rarely achieved by any other paintings of any other country.

It almost becomes like colored photographs and once again paintings become some of the most important records of the rule of these Mughal emperors.

This is the portrait of an aristocratic woman. It is supposed to be imaginary but it also testifies to the kind of imagination that the Mughal artists had and the attention that they paid to beauty and grace.

This is an allegorical portrait of Shah Jahan in the middle period of his reign where he is shown as being crowned by all the powers of heaven and all the angels are holding up the crown and he is also standing on the kind of crystal globe that his father had and there is the symbolic expressions of the 2 dynasties of the Safavids - the lion and the sheep. Angels and the divine signs became to an important part of Mughal painting to mark the auspicious ceremony. Here we
have Shah Shuja and Gaj Bahadur and Shah Shuja is taking over from Gaj Bahadur as the subedaar of Bengal. And here we have the 2 angles holding up the canopy. It shows that it is a very important political incident in the life of the Mughal rulers.

Finally we come to a very interesting painting which was to be found in the Mughal album. It is the painting of all the princes of the house of Timur and on one side we have Timur and his descendents up to Babur’s father. They are all painted in the classical Persian style. In the next row we have the Mughal princes coming up to Shah Jahan. The faces of the Mughal rulers were erased and from Akbar onwards right up to the last one we have actual portraits inserted. This shows that even if the glory of the earlier years of Timur’s reign accepted by the Mughal ruler, they came to realize that in order to establish the actual rule, the material condition of their governance, they will have to be presented as they were. This movement is terms of style towards a kind of realistic rending of the portraits also signifying the way Indian people and Indianisation of the superstructure was being carried out by the Mughal rulers.
Conclusion
With the allegorical portraits of Jahangir painted by Abul Hasan and Vichitra we enter a definitely new phase in the way paintings could be read as parts and sources of history. With Shah Jahan the whole message was carried forward; achievements of the Mughal artists increased. They played with light and shadow; they made their figures and incidents of that narrative more lifelike. And overall there is this entire plethora of paintings and illustrations which show very clearly that not only the patrons and artists were also involved in the construction of a world which was both real in some senses and at the same time it reflected the hierarchy and the powers of an empire which was considered to have been beneficial to the people.