A MUGHAL-STYLE PLEASURE PAVILION FROM A HINDU PALACE OR GARDEN RESORT

By George Michell

Leaving their homeland in Uzbekistan in Central Asian in the early 16th century, the Mughals arrived as conquerors in northern India. Within merely a few decades they had established an empire that stretched from Afghanistan in the west to Bengal in the east, and southward deep into the Indian peninsular. The Mughals dominated the warfare, politics, culture and arts of the Indian Subcontinent for more than 200 years, during which time they evolved their own type of architecture. This fused the forms and decorative designs of the Persianate world from where the Mughals originated, with the construction techniques and ornamental motifs of the country they settled in. The result is a building style that is both Persianate and Indian. So great was the influence of the Mughals that their architecture spread across the country to become *the* Indian style, extending beyond the Mughal frontiers, and continuing after the middle of the 18th century when the Mughals lost most of their power. Adopted by subordinate rulers of minor kingdoms and lords of great estates, many of them Hindu, Mughal-style architecture continued to flourish into the late 18th century and early 19th century, to which period this pavilion belongs.

Mughal architecture is a unique synthesis of disparate features. Unlike buildings in the Persianate world, which are mostly of brick and cloaked with ceramic tiles, Mughal monuments showcase the skills of Indian stone masons with their age-old experience in fashioning local sandstone and marble. Mughal arches were not created from angled blocks, as is the practice in the Persianate world, but from solid masonry slabs placed one above the other according to Indian structural practice and then cut into arched shapes. From the middle of the 17th century, arches came to be enhanced with tiny lobes and were supported on circular columns with fluted, tapering shafts. Column bases and capitals were embellished with small pots, referring to the water of the sacred Ganga river carried in such pots, while the curling leaves and petals adorning these pots derive from the Indian lotus. Yet the column type, with its tapering fluted shaft, is an import from Italy. Knowledge of European architecture was transmitted to the Mughal court in the bibles with elaborate frontispieces conveyed by Portuguese missionaries. Catholic religious imagery, with its European emphasis on perspective, shading and realism, reached India in the same way, much to the fascination of the Mughal emperors, who ordered their artists to paint lifelike depictions of flowers, birds and animals. At the same time, designers and stone workers employed by the Mughals were influenced by European traditions. The palaces, mosques and tombs that they commissioned are provided with Italian-type columns and decorated with naturalistic carvings of flowers and stalks, as in the pavilion displayed here. European style flowers are seen in the spandrels of the lobed arches of the pavilion and in the continuous, scrolling leafy stalks that fill the band surrounding the three arches in a rectangular frame. The flowers depicted here vaguely resemble the iris, a favourite of the Mughals, shown in alternating closed and open blossoms. Another European floral motif is the acanthus carved at the bottom of the columns. Visitors will notice an additional band of cut-out tiny buds that emerge from open mouths of what appear to be simplified animal heads inside the central arch, while minute peacocks are to be seen on the pilasters

at either side. The basement panels beneath the three arches, however, are more typical of Islamic design, with their geometric, interlocking straps containing four-petalled lotuses and curling leaves. The same leaves are combined with six-petalled lotuses in the end corner blocks of the basement.

While the naturalism of the carved floral motifs on the pavilion reflects the impact of European art, these motifs are also related to the Indian tradition, in which the lotus, for example, is always considered an auspicious flower. Its appearance in the pavilion's decoration would have imbued the building and its inhabitants with magical protection. From the Islamic point of view, as expressed in the art of the Persianate world, the floral motifs would have served as a reminder that Paradise is always conceived as a garden. In this way, the pavilion's decoration combines European, Indian and Persianate themes, a synthesis that is such an outstanding feature of Mughal design. Yet the context of the pavilion may not be Mughal: most likely, it comes from a royal complex associated with one of the Hindu ruling families of northern India who built their own Mughal-style palaces.

Palace buildings within Hindu fortresses are often pyramidal structures with multiple storeys. The upper levels are provided with windows, balconies and pavilions for the women of the royal household to look down on the activities in the courtyards below, in which they could not participate. Pavilions and balconies also form part of fortified gateways, where guards could survey the approach roads and surrounding landscape. More relevant to the pavilion displayed here are the pavilions erected in the walled gardens within Hindu palace complexes, or outside, in nearby resorts where rulers and their entourages made pleasurable excursions. Pavilions in gardens and resorts offered opportunities to admire the geometric arrangements of water channels, pools and planted plots, or the refreshing expanses of artificial lakes. Here, too, rulers might enjoy the company of companions as well as musical entertainments. The pavilion displayed here is open on three sides only, each with three lobed arches; its fourth side has a wall with only small windows. (The two side walls and rear wall are not displayed). These features make it unlikely that the pavilion would have come from the middle of a garden; it was probably once placed to one side with views in three directions, perhaps to a water feature. It is also possible that the pavilion opened onto a terrace where courtiers could enjoy music and dance in the cool of an evening. Just such a scene is depicted in the miniature painting from Udaipur showing Ari Singh on the island resort of Jag Nivas. The pavilion in which this king is seated has a smaller rooftop viewing pavilion, also with triple arches, somewhat like the one displayed here. Following Mughal precedent, the arches of such pavilions would have been sheltered by an angled stone overhang, known in India as a "chajja", but this is missing here. So, too, the stone parapet with which such pavilions were often topped. During the day, shade was provided by textile awnings or hanging straw mats cooled with water.

No records survive giving details from where in India this pavilion reached North America. Dismantled into component stone pieces, the front facing arcade of the building has now been erected. The pavilion's pale beige sandstone was sourced in quarries in the neighbourhood of Dholpur, south of the great Mughal capital of Agra, suggesting a possible place of origin. This same material was used by the Jat rulers, when in the early 18th century, they came to rebuild the palace inside Lohagarh, their fortified residence at Bharatpur, 50 miles west of Agra. By the end of the 18th

century, the Jats had seized Agra from the Mughals and proclaimed their supremacy in the area. Wishing to emulate the elaborate gardens of the Mughals, whom they had displaced, the Jats laid out an elaborate resort at Deeg, 20 miles north of Bharatpur, with pavilions opening onto pools and fountains surrounded by planted plots. While the pavilions at Bharatpur and Deeg do not precisely resemble the pavilion shown here, they are built from the same finely grained, beige sandstone, and employ almost exactly the same type of tapering fluted columns embellished with petals and carrying the same lobed arches. Similar sandstone columns and arches are also found in the grandly scaled memorial pavilion erected for Bakhtawar Singh after his death in 1815. This overlooks a great reservoir outside the walls of this king's palace in Alwar, capital of the Rajput state, some 50 miles west of Deeg. However, the pavilion shown here does not come from a funerary complex, but once formed part of a palace or garden resort. Its most likely patron was one of the Jat rulers of northern India in the late 18th or early 19th century.