

HTSI Collecting

Everyone's going big for Indian miniatures

With a slew of exhibitions and auctions, these tiny jewel-like paintings are now banking huge sums

Louis Wise SEPTEMBER 30 2023

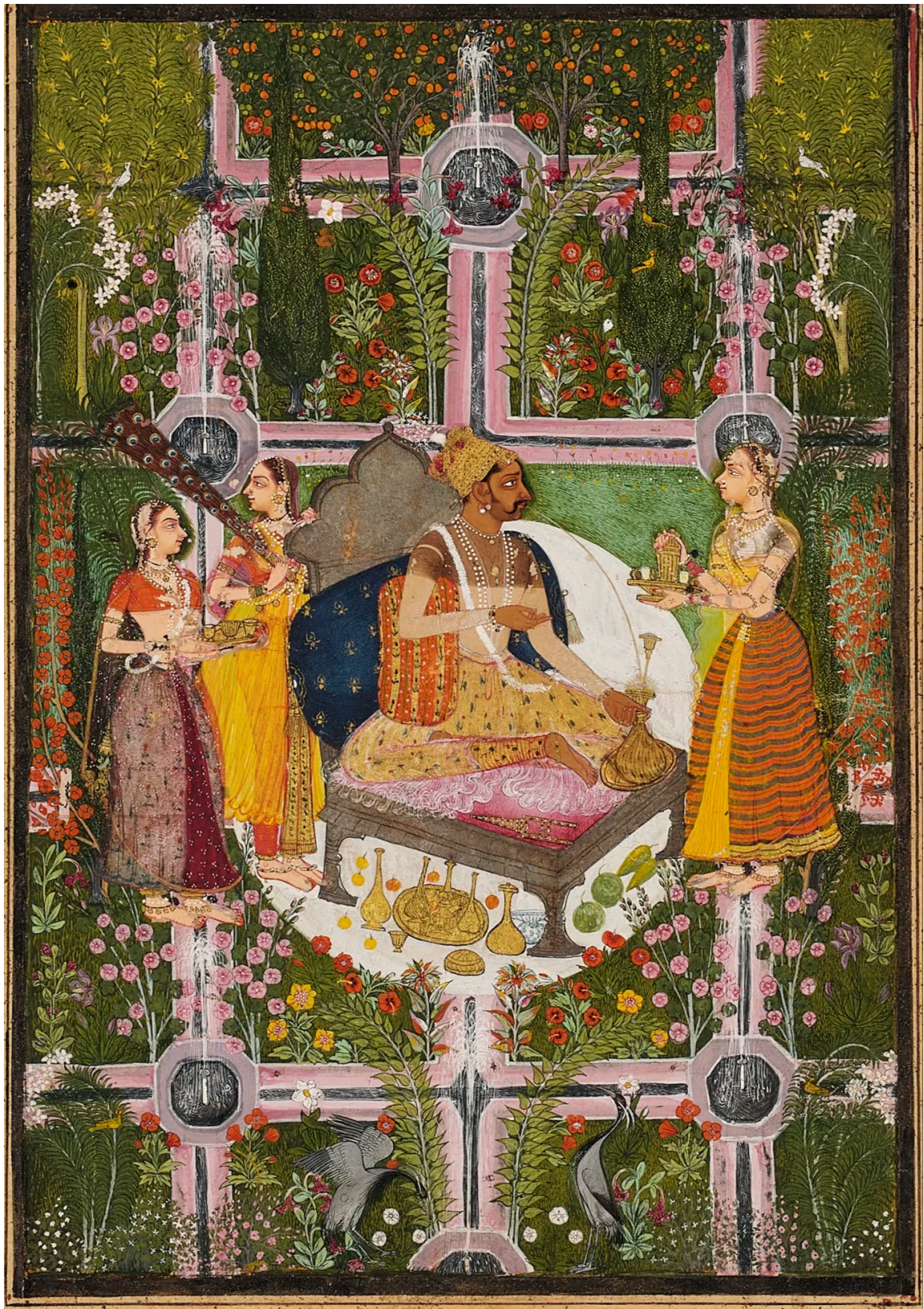
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The scope of the Indian miniature isn't miniature at all. This genre, which flourished across the south Asian continent for centuries, covers a vast terrain – various cultures, religions and subjects, from formal portraits of bureaucrats to fantastical mythical scenes. Mostly small in size, these images, produced originally for albums or folios, are distinguished by brilliance of colour, attention to detail and often very precious materials – many are made using natural pigments like malachite or lapis lazuli. And this autumn, they're all across London.

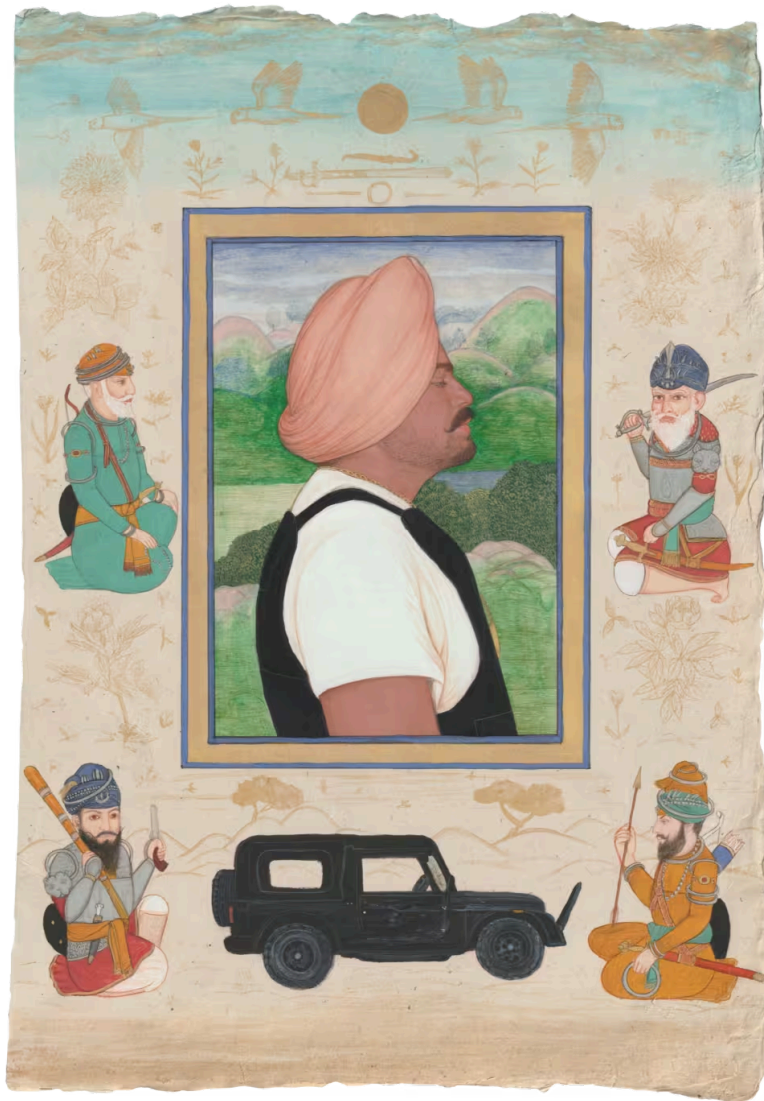
Next month, Sotheby's will hold parts three and four of the sale of the estate of [Stuart Cary Welch](#), considered by many to be the foremost miniatures collector of the past 50 years; two days later, Christie's will be selling that of Toby Falk, another great academic and specialist. This weekend, the MK Gallery in Milton Keynes opens [Beyond the Page: South Asian Miniature Painting and Britain, 1600 to Now](#) (7 October to 28 January), while in November, London's [Artist Room](#) will present new works by British Sikh artist [Jatinder Singh Durhailay](#), whose portraits are directly inspired by the tradition, but replace sultans and courtiers with musicians (costing between £2,000 and £10,000). In short, "It's a time to move in!" says art dealer [Francesca Galloway](#), who has worked in the field for five decades.



Rao Jagat Singh of Kota in his garden, c1660, attributed to the Hada master, £100,000-£150,000, Sotheby's



A portrait of Guru Gobind Singh Ji, 2023, by Jatinder Singh Durhailay



Sidhu Moosewala, 2023, by Jatinder Singh Durhailay

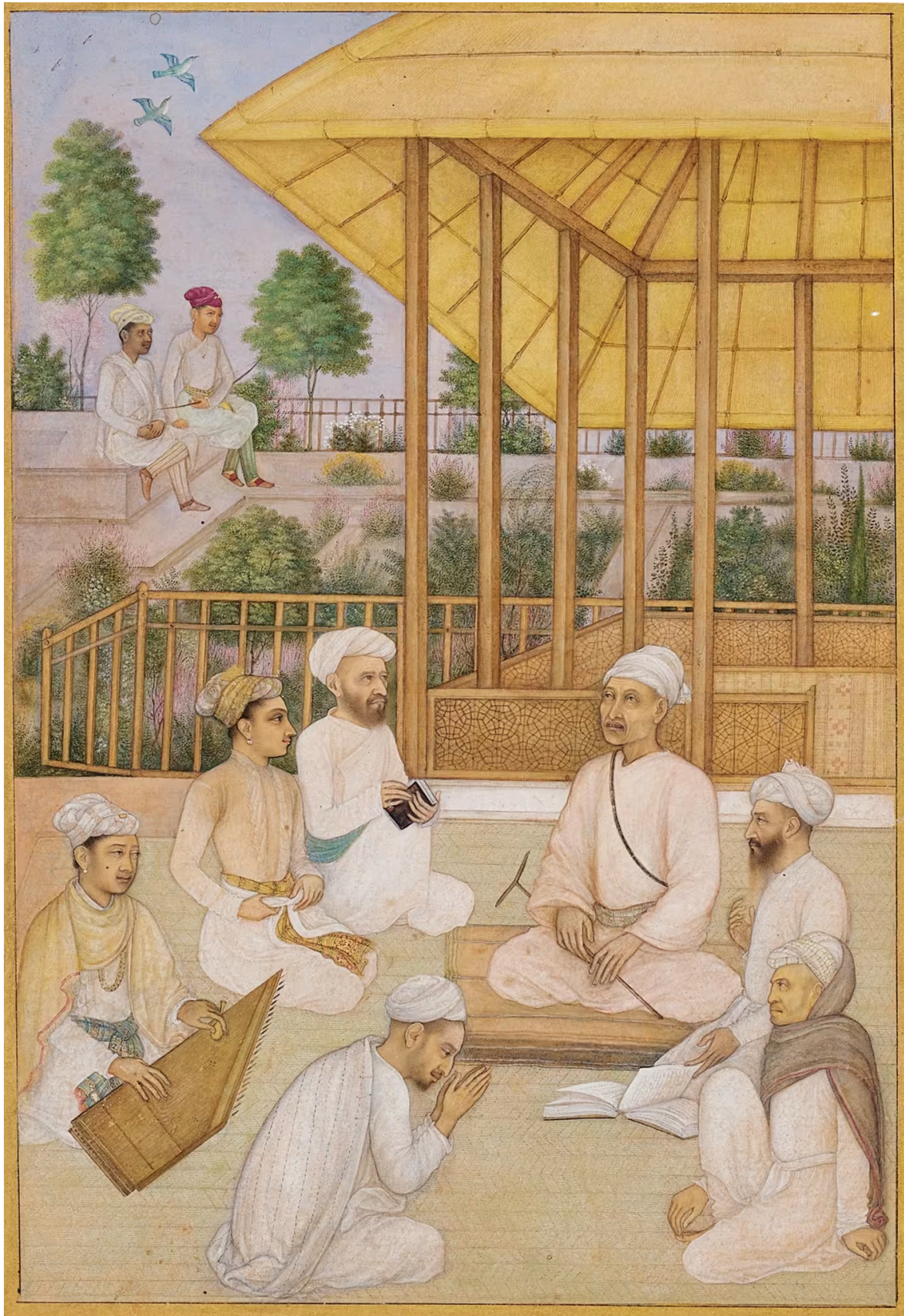
They're so romantic, so emotional, so beautiful

Behnaz Atighi Moghaddam, specialist in Islamic and Indian art at Christie's

Miniatures have been sent as gifts or brought back from travels ever since the high point of the Mughal empire in the 16th and 17th centuries. This is when the genre really flourished, expanding on a style imported from Persia. “For me, it’s the go-to when I think of Indian paintings,” says Behnaz Atighi Moghaddam, specialist in [Islamic and Indian art at Christie's](#). More recently, though, there was a shift in the market in the 1970s, when India’s maharajas lost their privy purses and sold the images commissioned by their ancestors. Cary Welch snapped many up, and, like Falk, helped promote their popularity in Europe and America via scholarly exhibitions at the V&A or the Met – which partly explains why the first two parts of the Cary Welch sale in 2011 broke records, making £21mn and £8.4mn respectively.



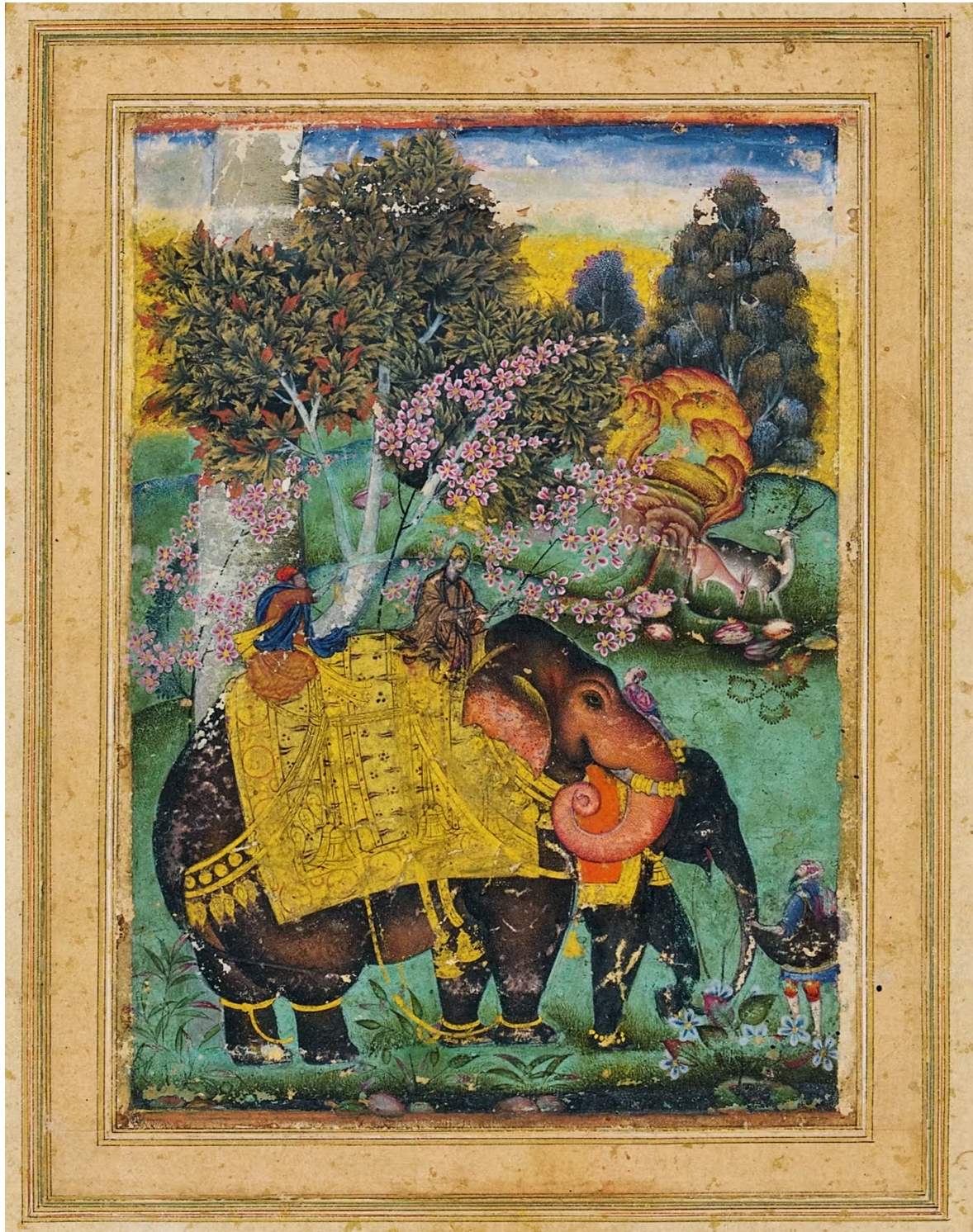
A herd of elephants at play, 18th century, £60,000-£80,000, Christie's



Prince Dara Shikoh with a group of holy men, c1635, attributed to Govardhan, £250,000-£350,000, Sotheby's

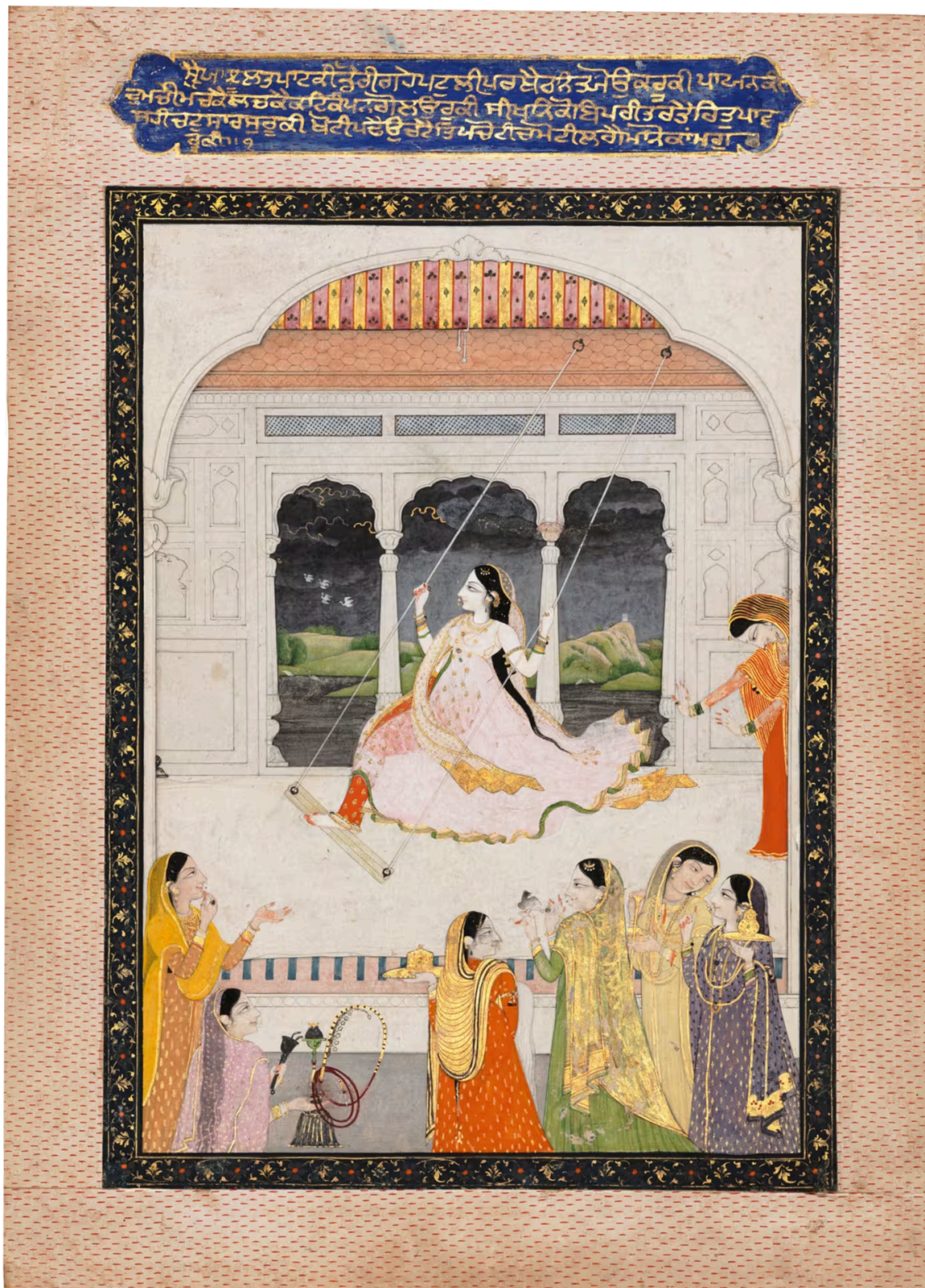
But in the past five to 10 years, the market has shifted gears. In addition to the usual crowd of buyers – academic institutions and museums; connoisseur collectors; interior decorators – has come a new demographic. A rising rich middle class in India has developed a fresh interest in its heritage – “and they like to buy the best”, says Galloway.

The only question is where to begin. Benedict Carter, head of [Islamic art at Sotheby's](#), recommends starting with one school and honing one's eye; also, keeping an exacting eye on provenance. So does the collector [Davinder Toor](#), who has specialised in works exploring his Sikh heritage. Carter thought the market for Mughal works might have "dipped" for a bit, "but in the past few years it's really come back". At Sotheby's, a prize lot will be a "small but jewel-like" portrait of Sultan Ibrahim Adil Shah II of Bijapur, painted c1600, where the king sits astride a ginormous gold-clad elephant in a whirl of pink blossom. Measuring only 14cm by 10cm, it has a starting price of £300,000-£500,000.



Sultan Ibrahim Adil Shah II of Bijapur riding his elephant Atash Khan, attributed to Farrukh Beg, c1600, £300,000-£500,000, Sotheby's

Atighi Moghaddam, meanwhile, has a personal preference for the Pahari school of painting, which has seen a marked increase in popularity – “they’re so romantic, so emotional and so beautiful”. Whereas Mughal paintings tend to dazzle by their formal beauty, Pahari ones seduce more subtly. She highlights a 19th-century picture, *Lady on a Swing*, estimated at £15,000-£20,000, where the lady sits waiting for her lover – her nervousness depicted by a stormy sky.



Lady on a Swing, c1810, £15,000-£20,000, Christie's



A scene from book IV of the Shangri Ramayana, c1700, £45,000, Francesca Galloway

Then there is the Company School – work created for British and French administrators who took over when the Mughal empire faded. This was “under the radar for a while”, says Carter, “but in the past 10 years it’s definitely seen an increase in interest and value. The top pieces from that field are making seven figures.” Christie’s has a leaf from the esteemed Fraser album (commissioned by the civil servant William Fraser in the 1810s), a compendium of flora and fauna, estimated at £60,000-£80,000. Yet as with all corners of the field, the market can be quite “patchy” and “unpredictable”, says Carter, serving up “wild price differentiations”. Sara Plumbly, head of Islamic and Indian art at Christie’s, also points out that some pictures in the Falk sale even have estimates of £400 – “absolutely a bargain”, she says.



Padshahnamah – the delivery of Presents for Prince Dara-Shukoh's Wedding, c1640

Galloway has two miniatures for sale: a portrait of a musician, the size of five postage stamps, for £175,000, and a scene from the Hindu legend, the Ramayama, which is “sort of slightly surreal – it’s fabulous” (£45,000). She points out that other auction houses like [Bonhams](#), [Roseberys](#) and [Chiswick Auctions](#) (which all have sales soon) are very active in “dealing at the lower end of the market”. Indeed, when it comes to value, she promises that charm really still trumps all, regardless of the age, provenance or artist’s name. “It’s a painting that arrests you – that you can’t walk by without stopping or looking,” she decrees. She should know, having collected them since she was a little girl.

What to read

[India: Art and Culture 1300-](#)

[1900](#) by Stuart Cary Welch

(Metropolitan Museum of Art)

[Indian Miniatures in the India](#)

[Office Library](#) by Toby Falk

(Sotheby Parke Bernet)

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