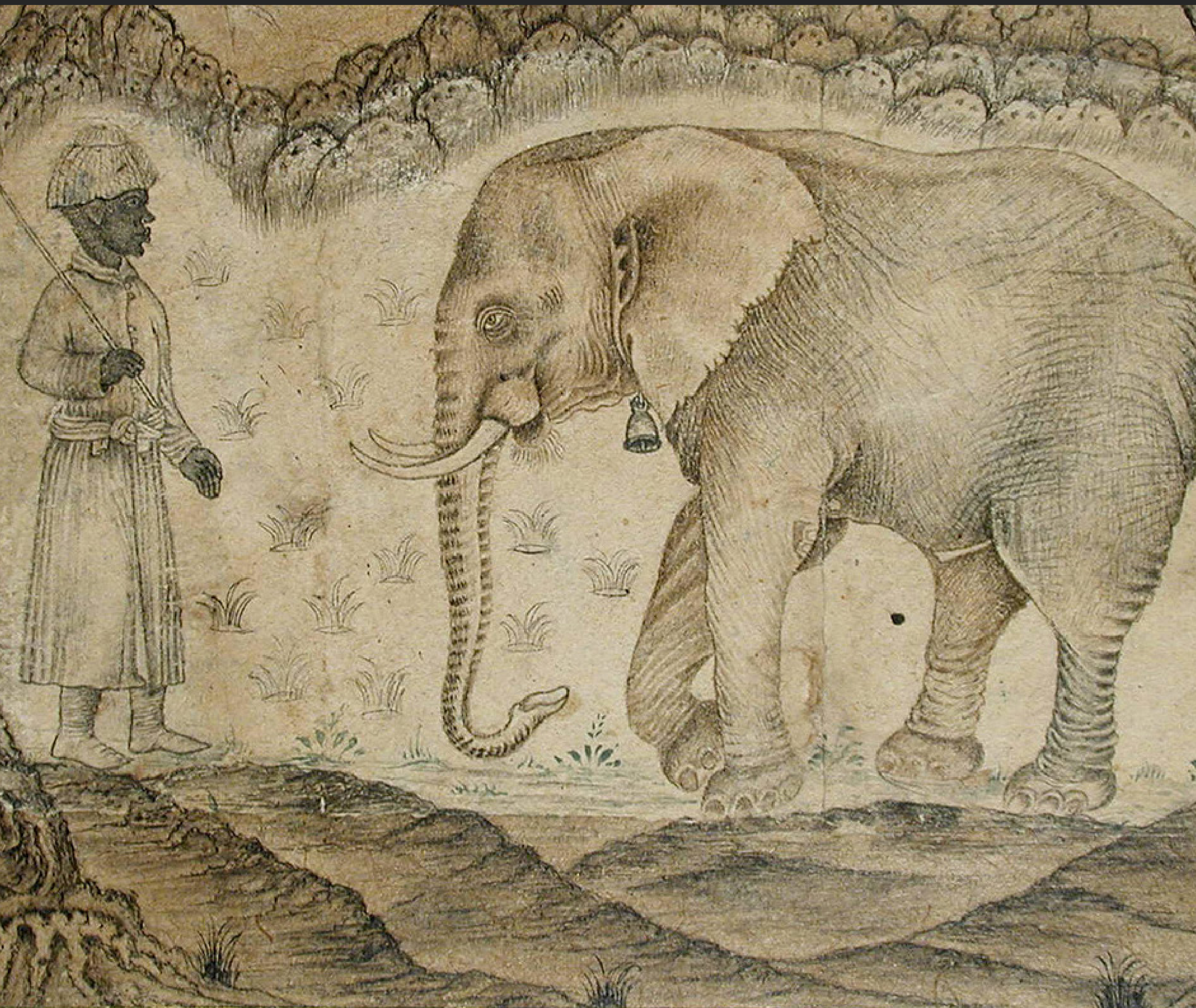
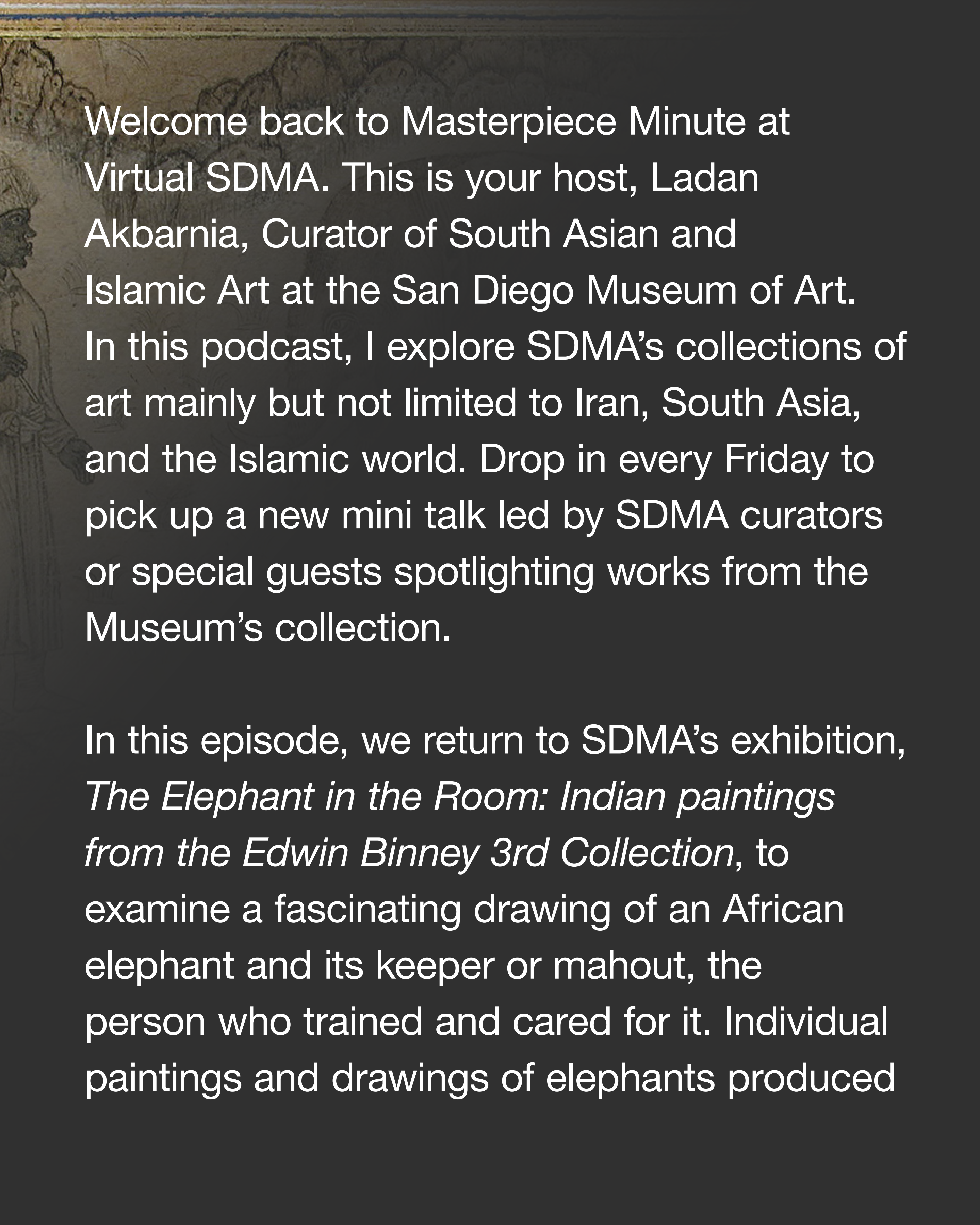


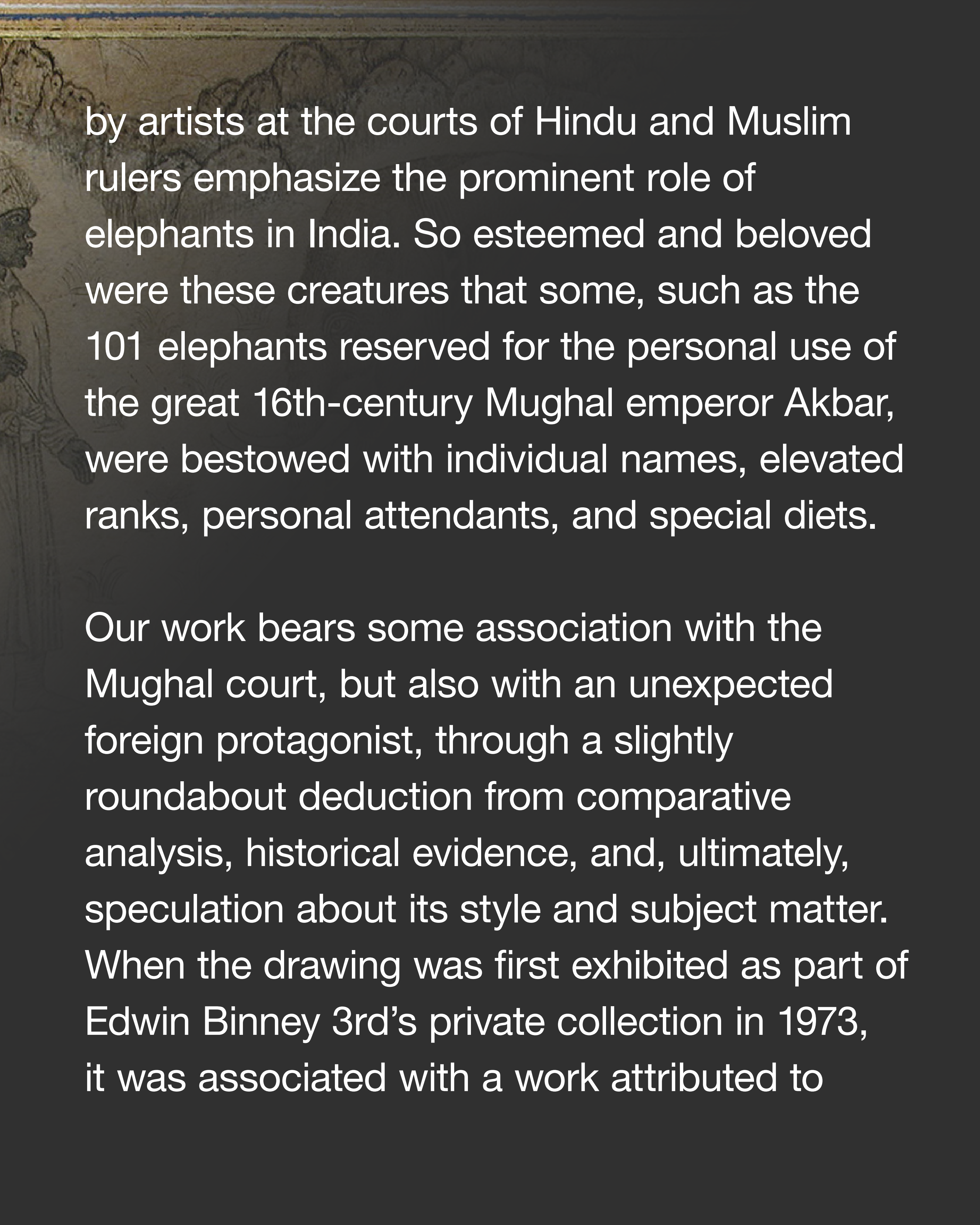
MASTERPIECE
MINUTE





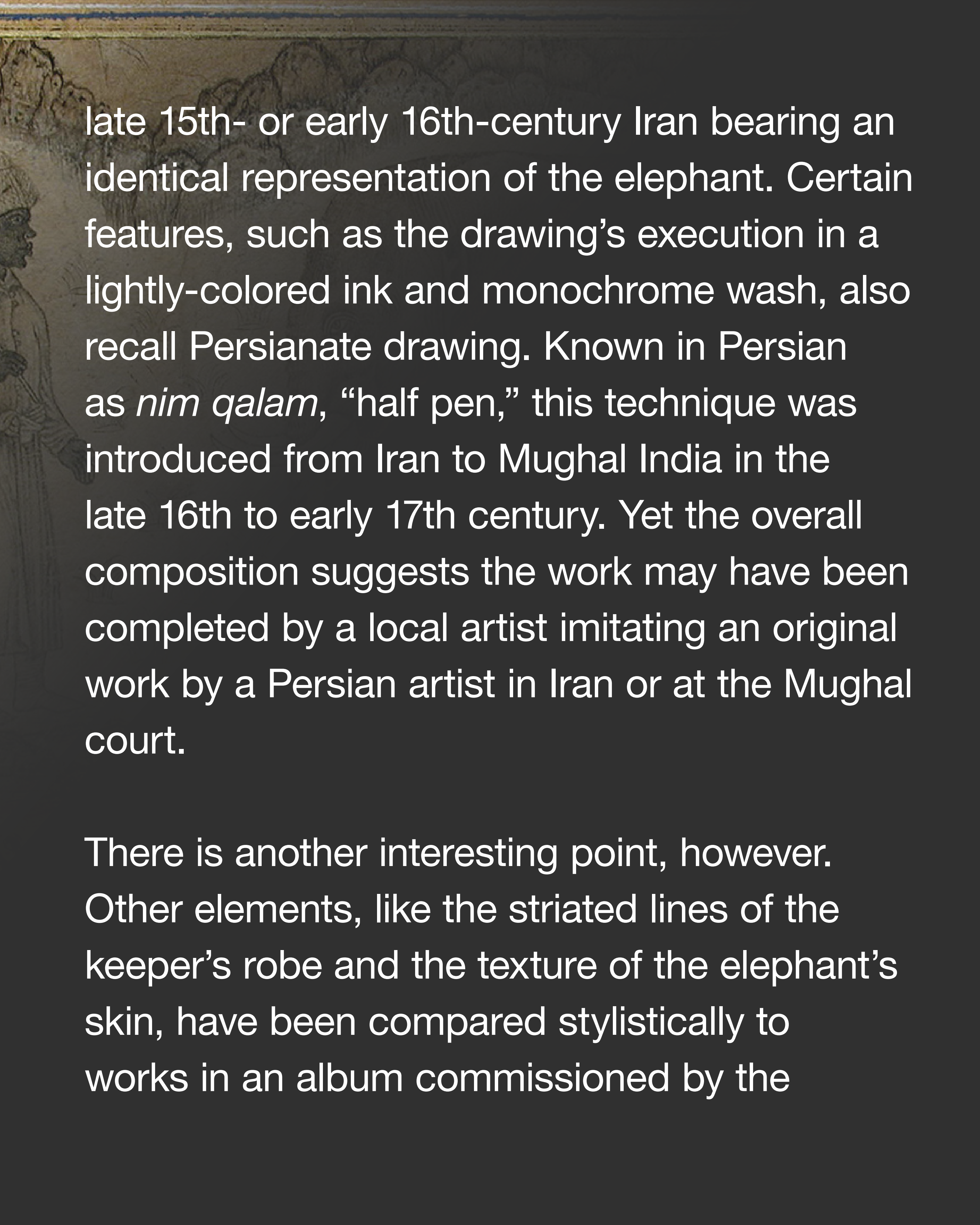
Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA. This is your host, Ladan Akbarnia, Curator of South Asian and Islamic Art at the San Diego Museum of Art. In this podcast, I explore SDMA's collections of art mainly but not limited to Iran, South Asia, and the Islamic world. Drop in every Friday to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators or special guests spotlighting works from the Museum's collection.

In this episode, we return to SDMA's exhibition, *The Elephant in the Room: Indian paintings from the Edwin Binney 3rd Collection*, to examine a fascinating drawing of an African elephant and its keeper or mahout, the person who trained and cared for it. Individual paintings and drawings of elephants produced



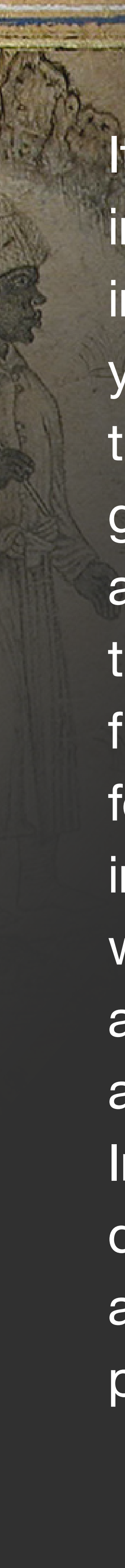
by artists at the courts of Hindu and Muslim rulers emphasize the prominent role of elephants in India. So esteemed and beloved were these creatures that some, such as the 101 elephants reserved for the personal use of the great 16th-century Mughal emperor Akbar, were bestowed with individual names, elevated ranks, personal attendants, and special diets.

Our work bears some association with the Mughal court, but also with an unexpected foreign protagonist, through a slightly roundabout deduction from comparative analysis, historical evidence, and, ultimately, speculation about its style and subject matter. When the drawing was first exhibited as part of Edwin Binney 3rd's private collection in 1973, it was associated with a work attributed to

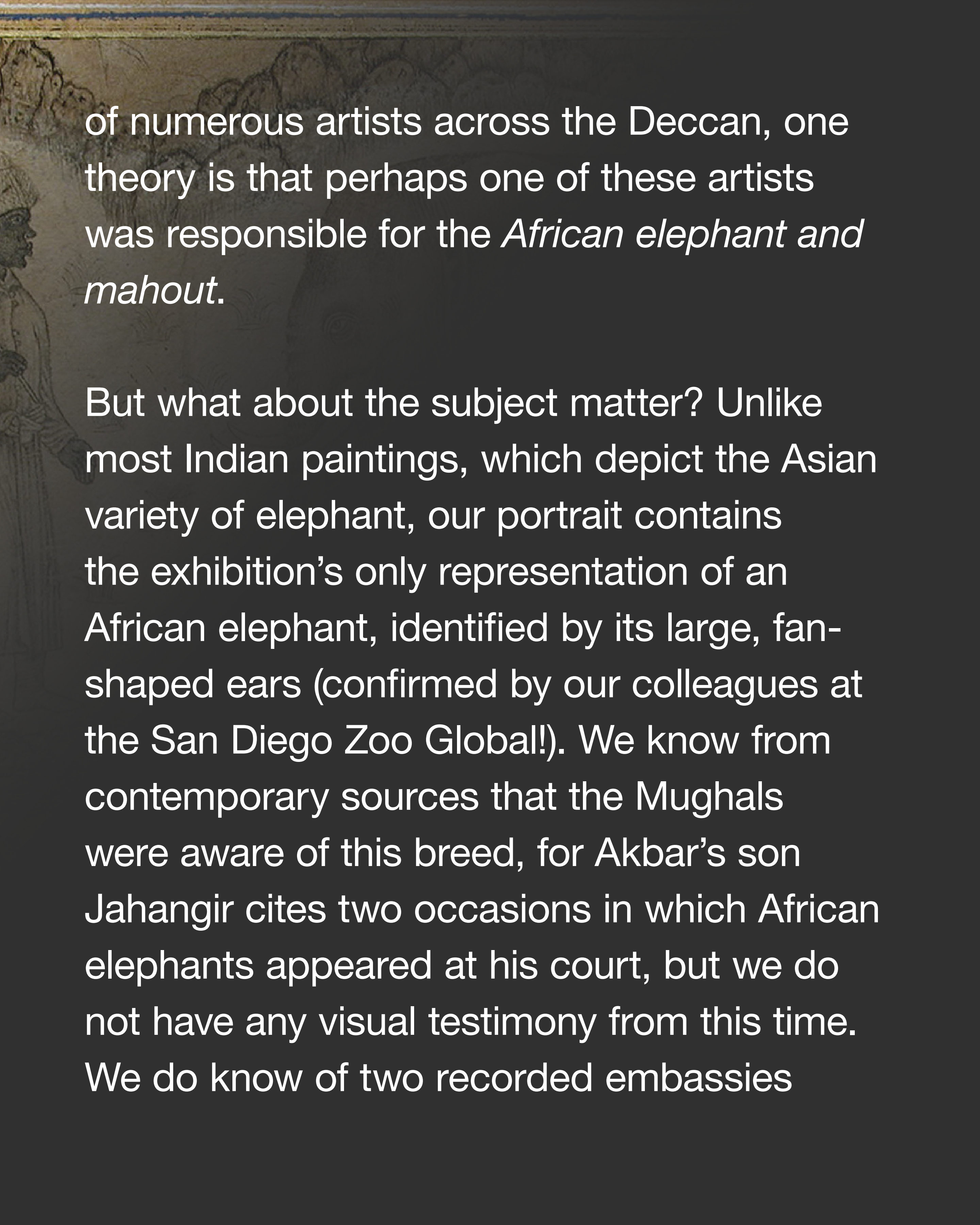


late 15th- or early 16th-century Iran bearing an identical representation of the elephant. Certain features, such as the drawing's execution in a lightly-colored ink and monochrome wash, also recall Persianate drawing. Known in Persian as *nim qalam*, "half pen," this technique was introduced from Iran to Mughal India in the late 16th to early 17th century. Yet the overall composition suggests the work may have been completed by a local artist imitating an original work by a Persian artist in Iran or at the Mughal court.

There is another interesting point, however. Other elements, like the striated lines of the keeper's robe and the texture of the elephant's skin, have been compared stylistically to works in an album commissioned by the

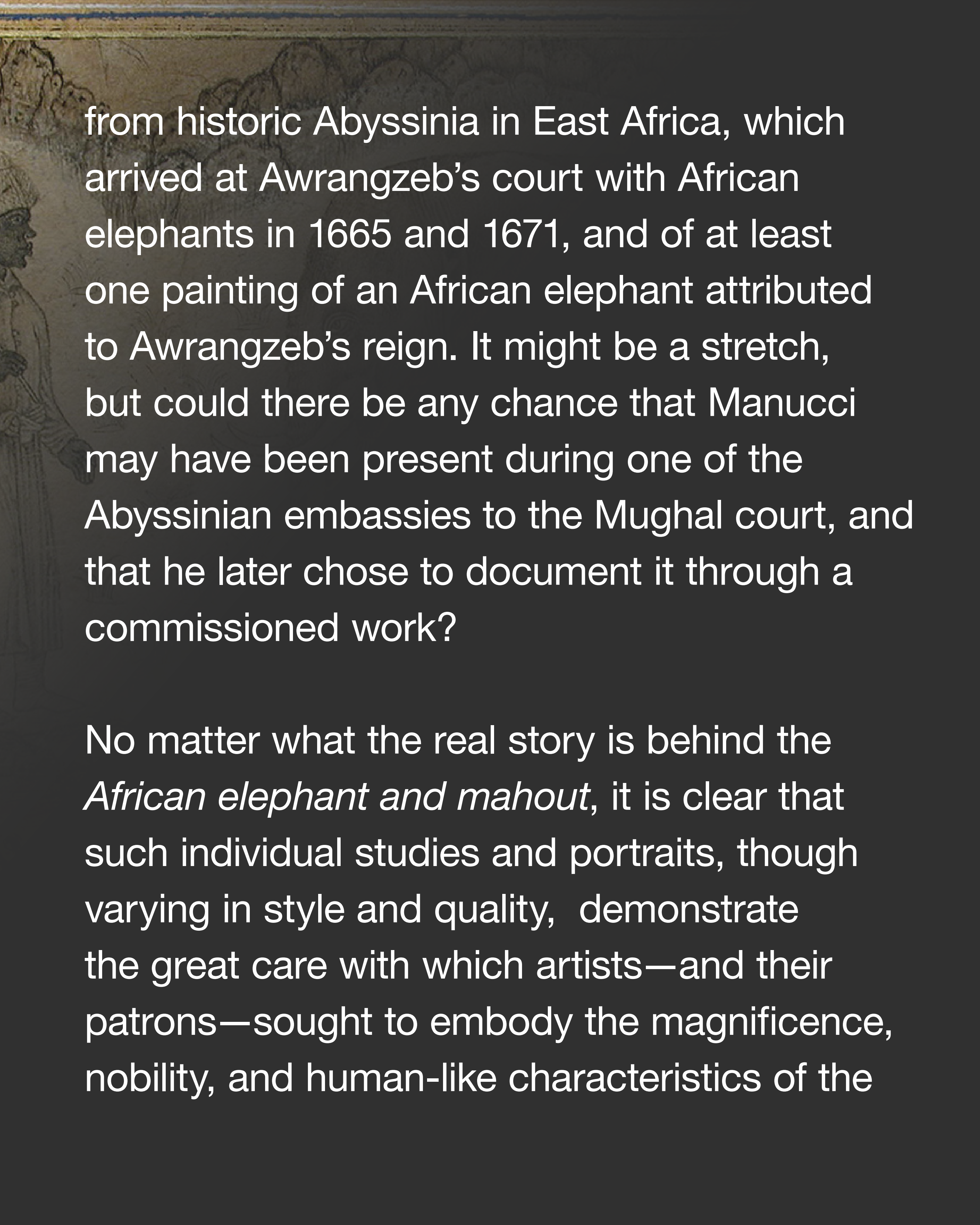


Italian doctor and traveler Niccolao Manucci, in Tamil Nadu. Manucci spent several years in India from the 1650s through the early years of the 18th century, many of them at the Mughal court under the reign of Akbar's great-grandson Awrangzeb. He also spent about 15 years in the Deccan, where he wrote the bulk of a history of the Mughals before finally taking up residence at the English fortified settlement of Madras (now Chennai) in Tamil Nadu. Most interestingly, this was where Manucci commissioned at least two albums, one of which includes the works associated with our drawing. Enlisting local Indian artists for its paintings, the Venetian doctor distinguished himself as an engaged and unconventional foreign patron. As various political circumstances led to the movement



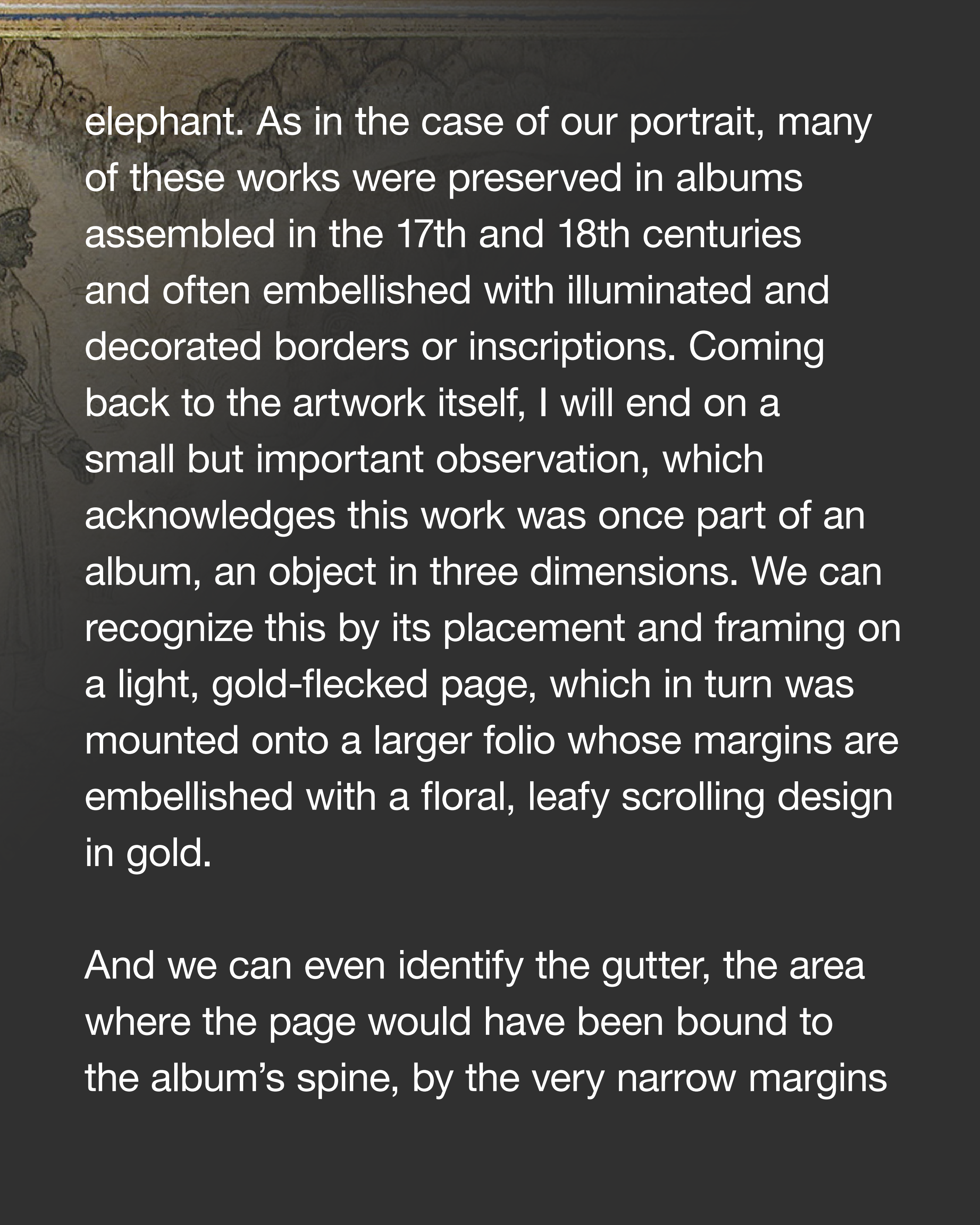
of numerous artists across the Deccan, one theory is that perhaps one of these artists was responsible for the *African elephant and mahout*.

But what about the subject matter? Unlike most Indian paintings, which depict the Asian variety of elephant, our portrait contains the exhibition's only representation of an African elephant, identified by its large, fan-shaped ears (confirmed by our colleagues at the San Diego Zoo Global!). We know from contemporary sources that the Mughals were aware of this breed, for Akbar's son Jahangir cites two occasions in which African elephants appeared at his court, but we do not have any visual testimony from this time. We do know of two recorded embassies



from historic Abyssinia in East Africa, which arrived at Awrangzeb's court with African elephants in 1665 and 1671, and of at least one painting of an African elephant attributed to Awrangzeb's reign. It might be a stretch, but could there be any chance that Manucci may have been present during one of the Abyssinian embassies to the Mughal court, and that he later chose to document it through a commissioned work?

No matter what the real story is behind the *African elephant and mahout*, it is clear that such individual studies and portraits, though varying in style and quality, demonstrate the great care with which artists—and their patrons—sought to embody the magnificence, nobility, and human-like characteristics of the



elephant. As in the case of our portrait, many of these works were preserved in albums assembled in the 17th and 18th centuries and often embellished with illuminated and decorated borders or inscriptions. Coming back to the artwork itself, I will end on a small but important observation, which acknowledges this work was once part of an album, an object in three dimensions. We can recognize this by its placement and framing on a light, gold-flecked page, which in turn was mounted onto a larger folio whose margins are embellished with a floral, leafy scrolling design in gold.

And we can even identify the gutter, the area where the page would have been bound to the album's spine, by the very narrow margins

running horizontally along the groundline of the drawing.

Thank you for listening. This has been Ladan on Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA!

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