

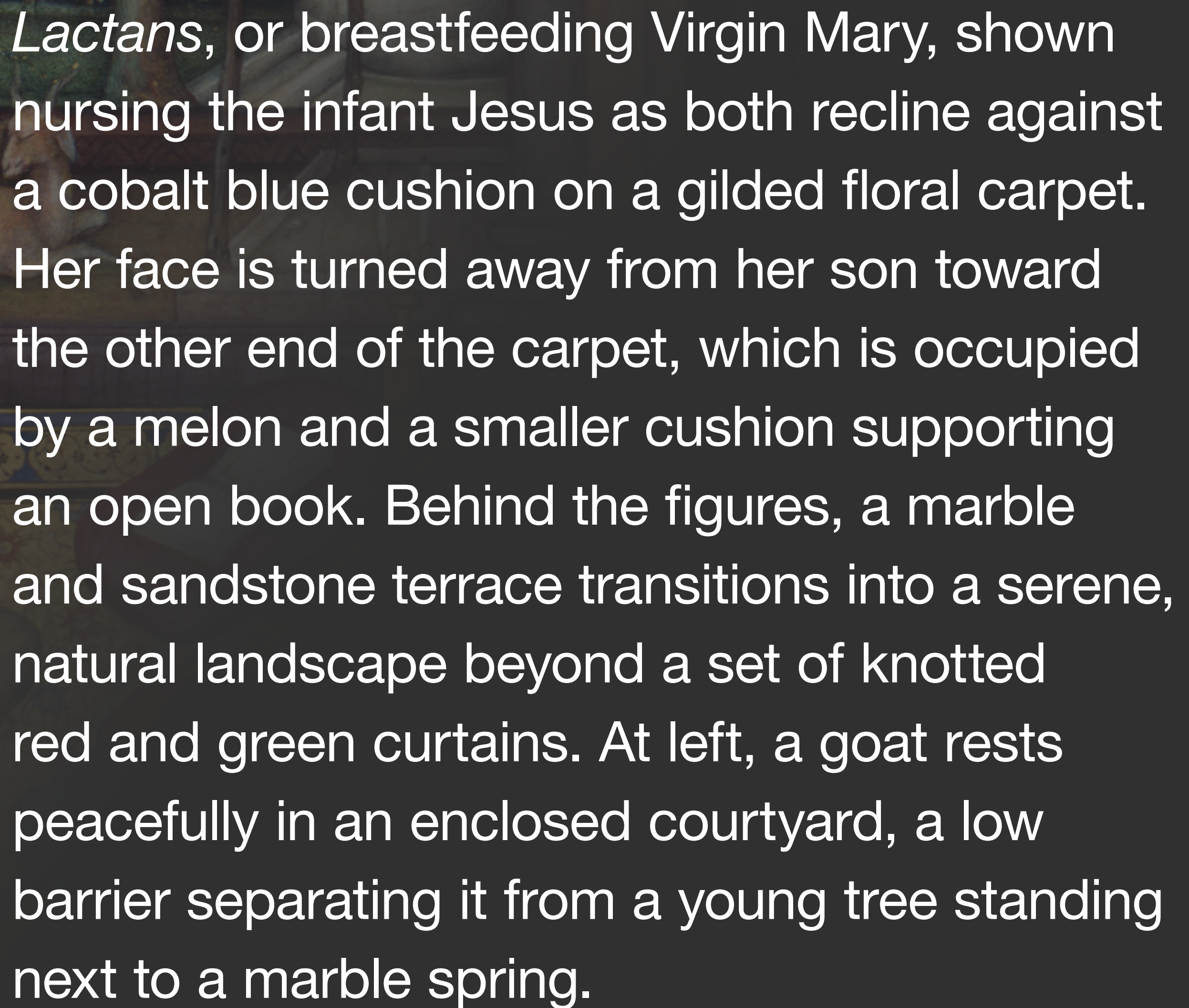
MASTERPIECE MINUTE





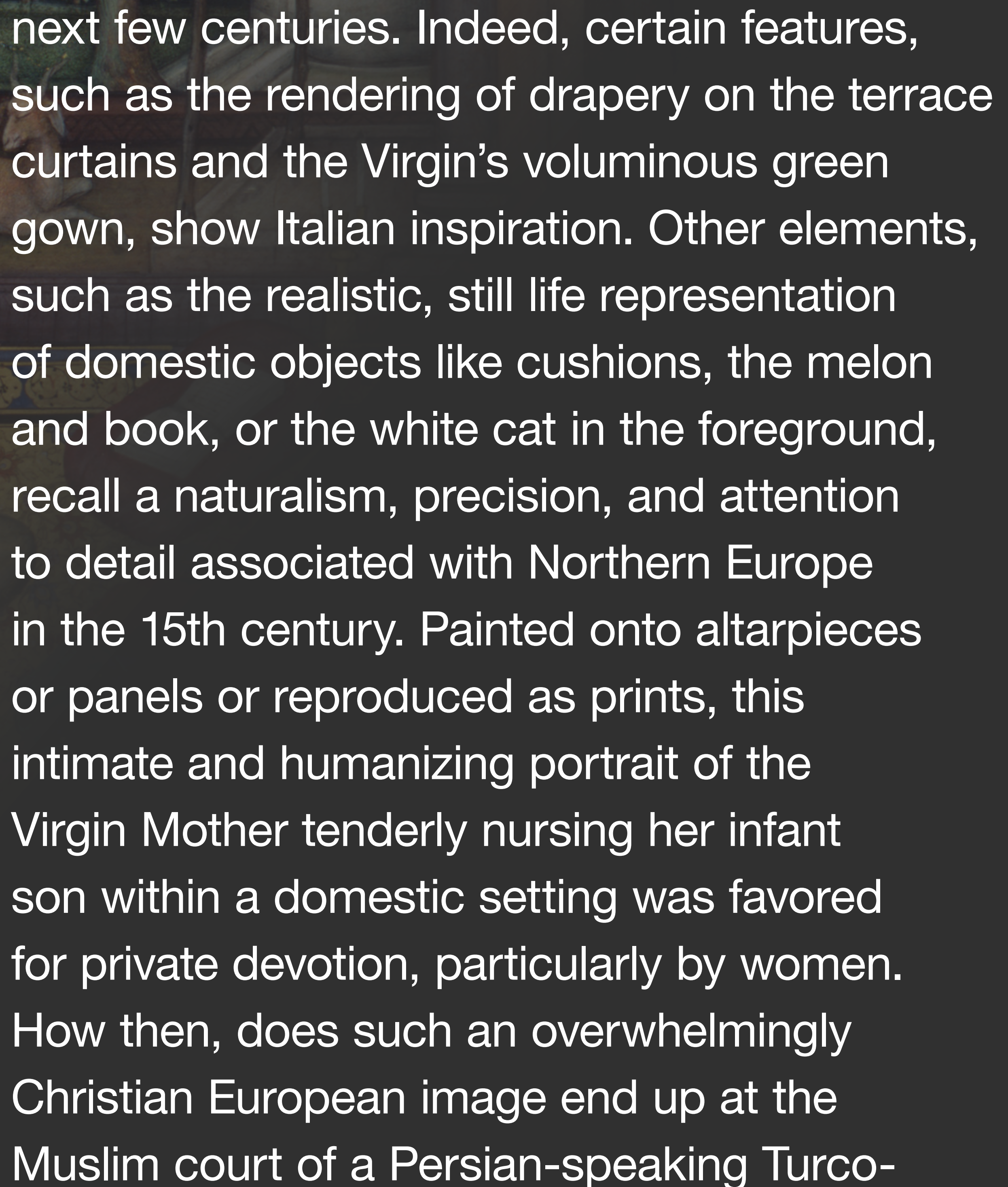
Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA. This is your host, Ladan Akbarnia, Curator of South Asian and Islamic Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in every other Friday to hear a new mini talk led by SDMA curators or guests focusing on works from the Museum's collection.

Today's episode launches us into December and the holiday season not a moment too soon, this year! and highlights the global impact of images and traditions across cultures, space, and time. Do you recognize the subject of this painting, which was completed in the 1590s for the Mughal emperor Akbar, then mounted onto the gilt embellished page of an album made for his son and successor, Jahangir? It is an image of the *Madonna*

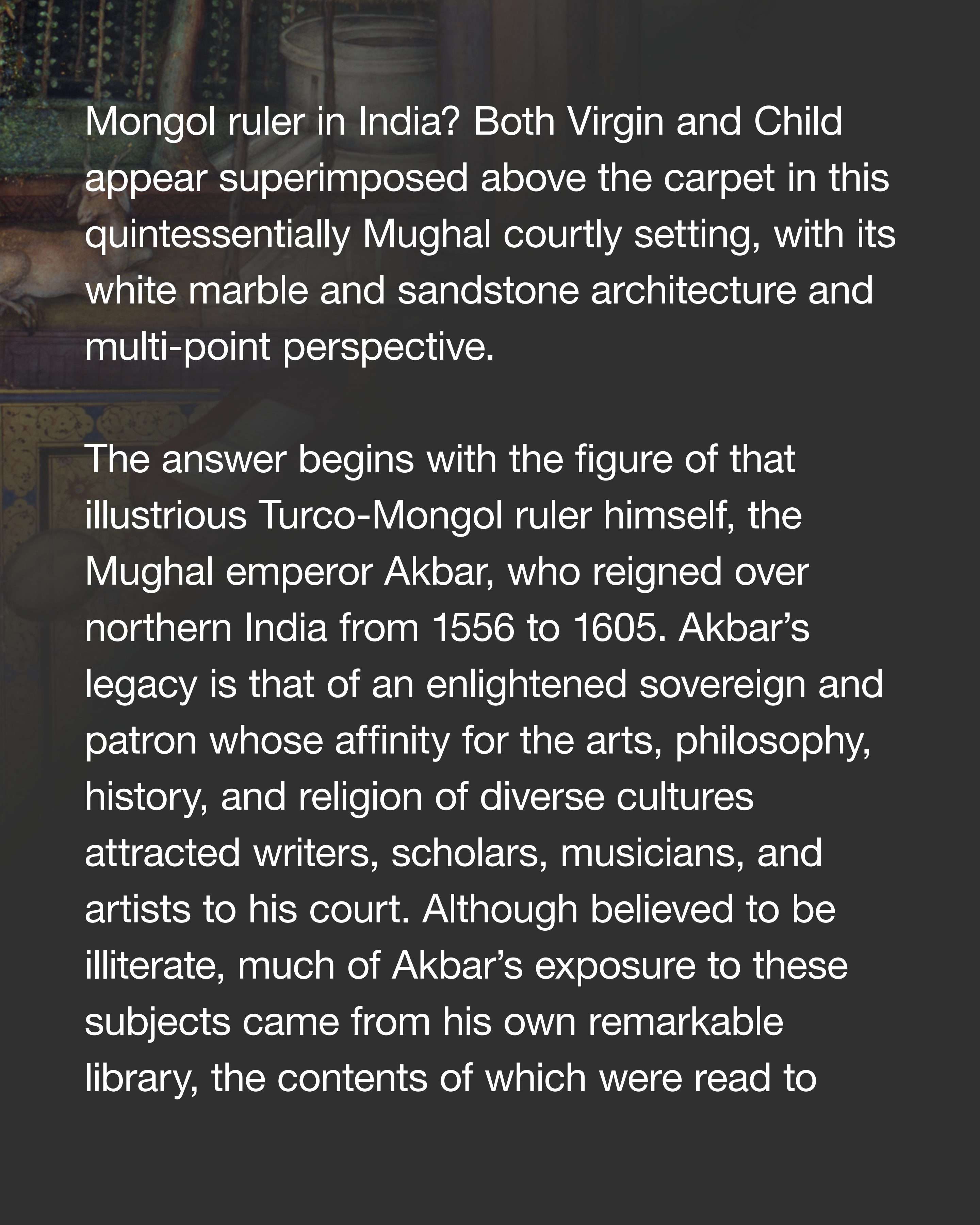
A detail from the background of the painting 'The Virgin Lactans' by Giotto. It shows a serene landscape with a marble and sandstone terrace, a set of knotted red and green curtains, a goat resting in an enclosed courtyard, a low barrier, a young tree, and a marble spring.

Lactans, or breastfeeding Virgin Mary, shown nursing the infant Jesus as both recline against a cobalt blue cushion on a gilded floral carpet. Her face is turned away from her son toward the other end of the carpet, which is occupied by a melon and a smaller cushion supporting an open book. Behind the figures, a marble and sandstone terrace transitions into a serene, natural landscape beyond a set of knotted red and green curtains. At left, a goat rests peacefully in an enclosed courtyard, a low barrier separating it from a young tree standing next to a marble spring.

The image of the *Madonna Lactans* would have been familiar to 16th-century Europe, appearing as early as the 12th century in Italy and fluctuating in style and popularity over the

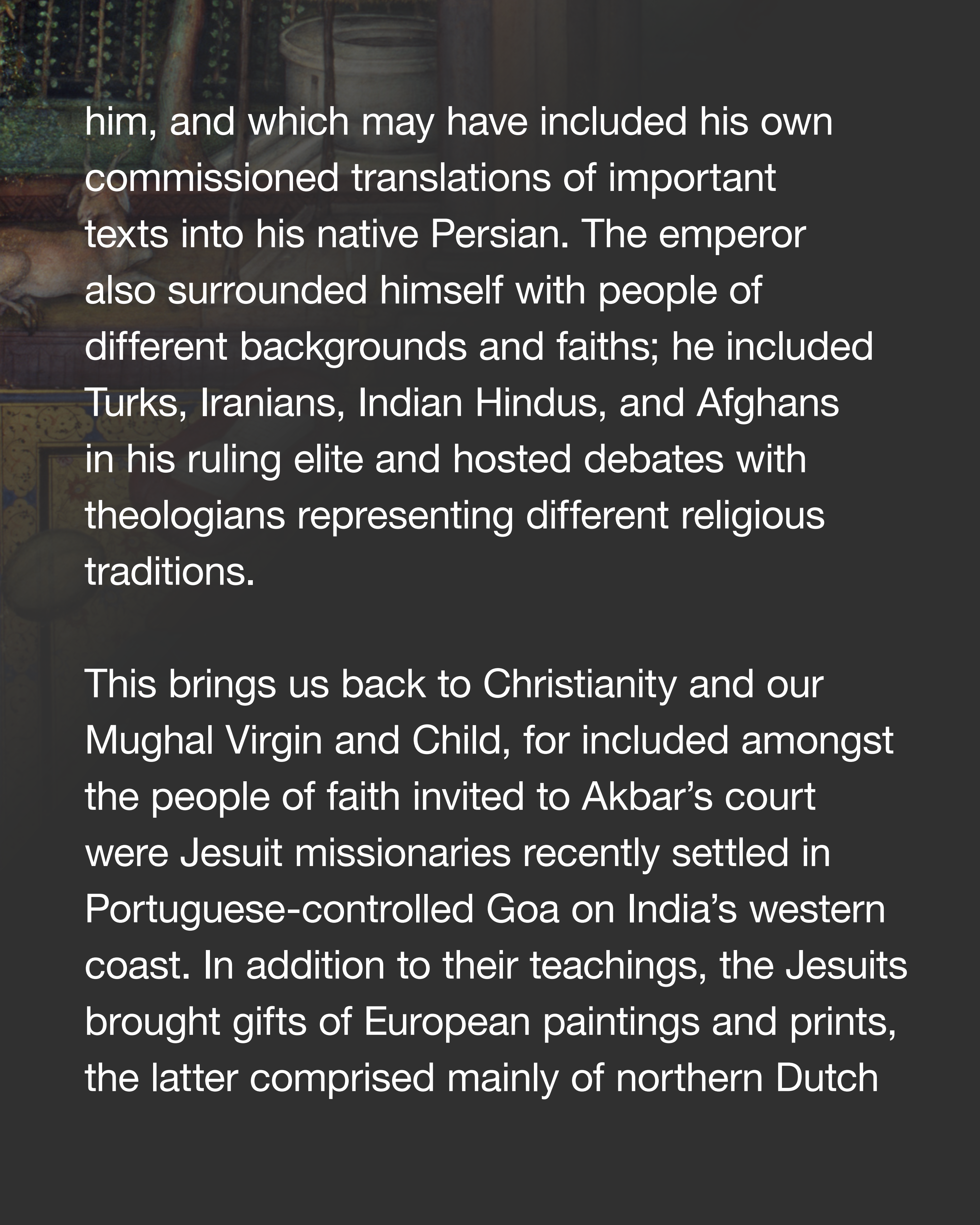


next few centuries. Indeed, certain features, such as the rendering of drapery on the terrace curtains and the Virgin's voluminous green gown, show Italian inspiration. Other elements, such as the realistic, still life representation of domestic objects like cushions, the melon and book, or the white cat in the foreground, recall a naturalism, precision, and attention to detail associated with Northern Europe in the 15th century. Painted onto altarpieces or panels or reproduced as prints, this intimate and humanizing portrait of the Virgin Mother tenderly nursing her infant son within a domestic setting was favored for private devotion, particularly by women. How then, does such an overwhelmingly Christian European image end up at the Muslim court of a Persian-speaking Turco-



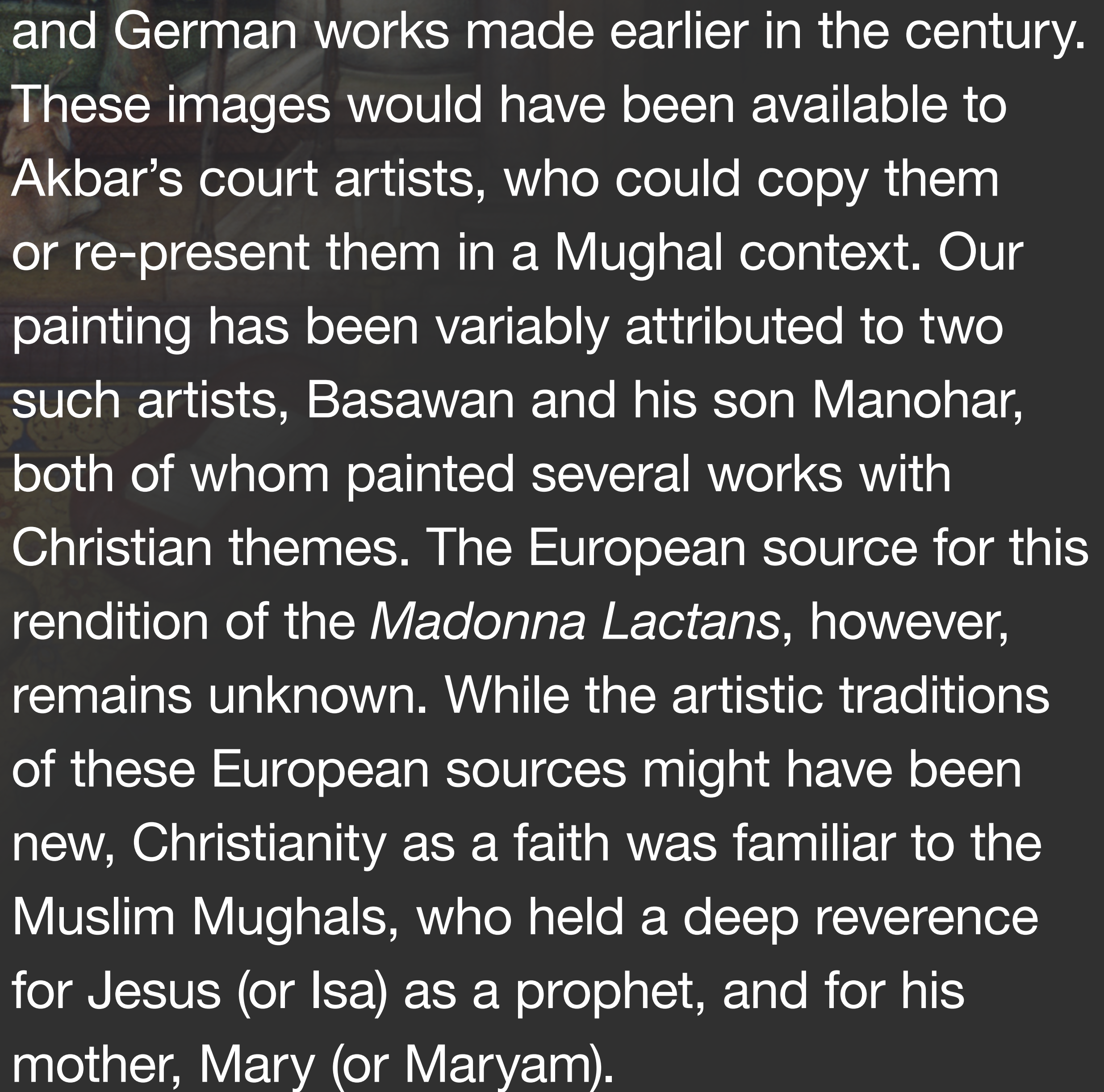
Mongol ruler in India? Both Virgin and Child appear superimposed above the carpet in this quintessentially Mughal courtly setting, with its white marble and sandstone architecture and multi-point perspective.

The answer begins with the figure of that illustrious Turco-Mongol ruler himself, the Mughal emperor Akbar, who reigned over northern India from 1556 to 1605. Akbar's legacy is that of an enlightened sovereign and patron whose affinity for the arts, philosophy, history, and religion of diverse cultures attracted writers, scholars, musicians, and artists to his court. Although believed to be illiterate, much of Akbar's exposure to these subjects came from his own remarkable library, the contents of which were read to



him, and which may have included his own commissioned translations of important texts into his native Persian. The emperor also surrounded himself with people of different backgrounds and faiths; he included Turks, Iranians, Indian Hindus, and Afghans in his ruling elite and hosted debates with theologians representing different religious traditions.

This brings us back to Christianity and our Mughal Virgin and Child, for included amongst the people of faith invited to Akbar's court were Jesuit missionaries recently settled in Portuguese-controlled Goa on India's western coast. In addition to their teachings, the Jesuits brought gifts of European paintings and prints, the latter comprised mainly of northern Dutch

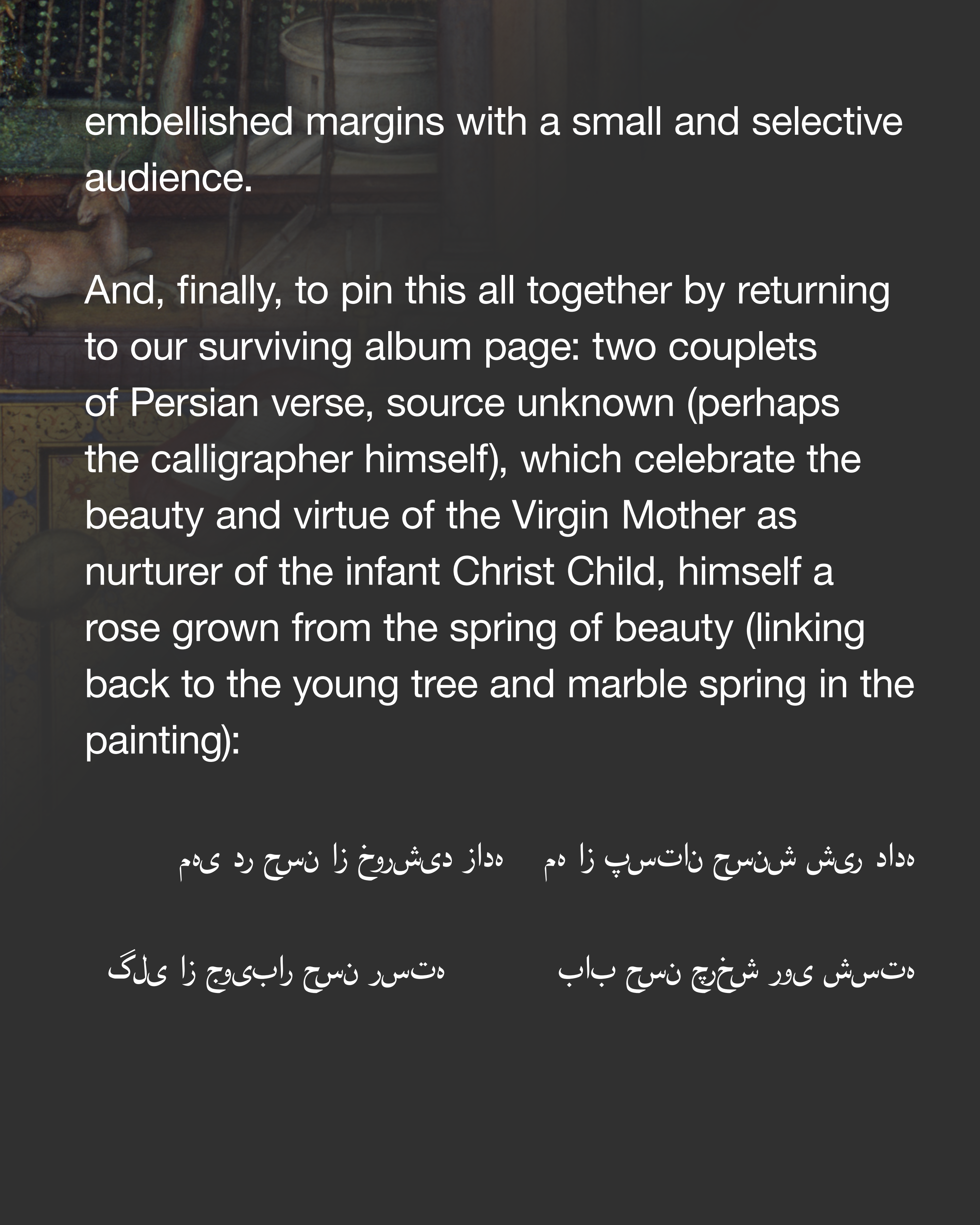
A painting of a white dog lying down in a room. In the background, there is a large white bucket and a window showing a view of a forest. The text is overlaid on the painting.

and German works made earlier in the century. These images would have been available to Akbar's court artists, who could copy them or re-present them in a Mughal context. Our painting has been variably attributed to two such artists, Basawan and his son Manohar, both of whom painted several works with Christian themes. The European source for this rendition of the *Madonna Lactans*, however, remains unknown. While the artistic traditions of these European sources might have been new, Christianity as a faith was familiar to the Muslim Mughals, who held a deep reverence for Jesus (or Isa) as a prophet, and for his mother, Mary (or Maryam).

One of the most beautiful things I find about this painting actually the entire album page

The background image is a painting depicting the Virgin Mary nursing the Christ Child. Mary is shown in a seated position, wearing a flowing European-style gown with a high collar and long sleeves, adorned with jewelry and hair ornaments. The Christ Child is lying on her chest, nursing. In the background, a dog is visible on the left, and a water jug and wash basin are on the right. The setting appears to be a domestic interior, possibly a room in a royal residence. The painting is characterized by its detailed rendering of fabric and the intimate scene of a mother nursing her child.

is the inherent intimacy that unifies elements of diverse traditions over space and time. Sumptuously rendered in flowing European drapery and adorned with jewelry and hair ornaments reflecting Indian tradition, the Virgin Mary is presented in the equally luxurious context of a royal residence conveyed through both European and Mughal artistic traditions. Yet other elements—domesticated animals, the open book, the water jug and wash basin—and the very act of a mother nursing her child, express the informality and intimacy of a private home. This association was further reinforced when the painting was mounted into a magnificent album for Akbar's son Jahangir, a devoted patron and connoisseur of the arts, who would have shared its exquisite pages of paintings and calligraphies and their

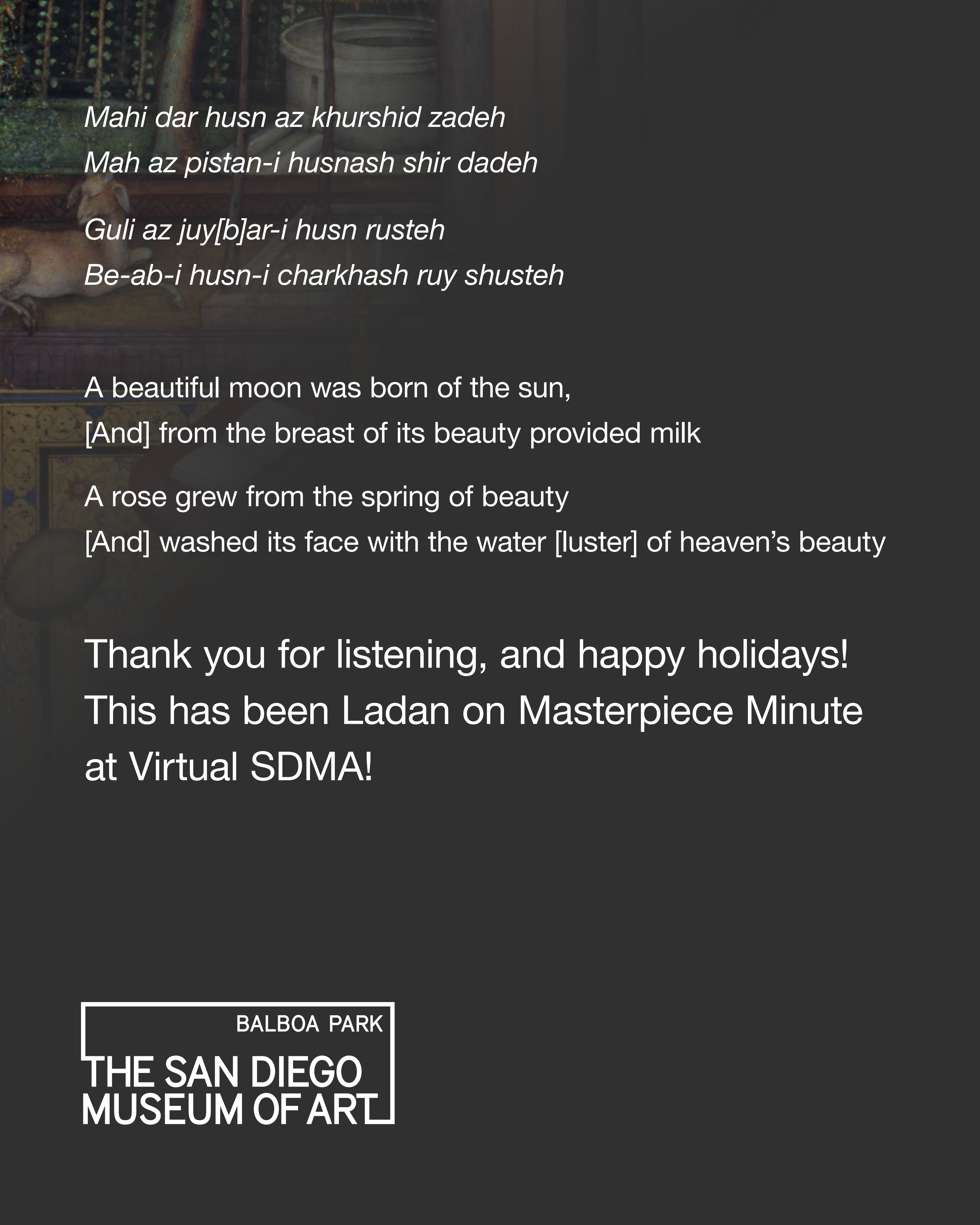
A Persian miniature painting depicting a deer standing in a garden. In the background, there is a well with a wooden frame and a bucket, and several trees with green foliage. The scene is set in a traditional Persian garden style.

embellished margins with a small and selective audience.

And, finally, to pin this all together by returning to our surviving album page: two couplets of Persian verse, source unknown (perhaps the calligrapher himself), which celebrate the beauty and virtue of the Virgin Mother as nurturer of the infant Christ Child, himself a rose grown from the spring of beauty (linking back to the young tree and marble spring in the painting):

ه‌داد ریش ش‌ن‌س‌ج ن‌ات‌س‌پ ز‌ا ه‌م ه‌داز دیش‌روخ ز‌ا ن‌س‌ج رد ی‌ه‌م

ه‌ت‌س‌ش ی‌ور ش‌خ‌ر‌ج ن‌س‌ج ب‌اب ه‌ت‌سر ن‌س‌ج ر‌اب‌ی‌وج ز‌ا ی‌ل‌گ



*Mahi dar husn az khurshid zadeh
Mah az pistan-i husnash shir dadeh
Guli az juy[b]ar-i husn rusteh
Be-ab-i husn-i charkhash ruy shusteh*

A beautiful moon was born of the sun,
[And] from the breast of its beauty provided milk

A rose grew from the spring of beauty
[And] washed its face with the water [luster] of heaven's beauty

Thank you for listening, and happy holidays!
This has been Ladan on Masterpiece Minute
at Virtual SDMA!