



Today's Masterpiece: Attributed to the Bodleian Painter, [*Sultan Ibrahim Adil Shah II standing*](#), India, Bijapur, ca. 1620. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper. Edwin Binney 3rd Collection, 1990.440.



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 month to hear a new mini talk led by SDMA curators or guests featuring works from the Museum's collection.

Today's episode introduces an intimate, reflective portrait of a Muslim ruler from the Deccan plateau in central India. Sultan Ibrahim 'Adil Shah II, who reigned over the Sultanate of Bijapur from 1580 to 1627, is identified by his iconic royal apparel: a transparent white robe, or *jama*, covering trousers visible underneath the robe; a gold sash, or *patka*, with a geometric design; a flat turban wrapped in another gold sash; a white handkerchief in his left hand; a Hindu rosary around his neck, which is composed of the dried stones of the Rudraksha stonefruit; and distinctive facial features associated with other portraits and contemporary descriptions of the ruler—such as a dark complexion, prominent nose, and thinning beard. Ibrahim 'Adil Shah appears standing, gazing beyond the picture frame in a contemplative expression against a minimal setting, flanked in the foreground by a pair of flowering plants, while two birds fly at upper right against a high horizon. In the distant background at the upper left part of the painting, a richly caparisoned elephant with an unusually long, curving trunk faces the same direction as the ruler, appearing to move only slightly, as if waiting for his royal master (and you'll notice that he's quite small, which suggests he's off in the distance).

The naturalism, technical skill, and draftsmanship of this portrait, as well as the plain, sparsely populated background have led to an attribution of this painting to an artist known as The Bodleian Painter, a name derived from other works tied to the same artist at the University of Oxford's Bodleian Library in England. Some of this skill can be detected in the composition's underdrawing, which is noticeable particularly where layers of paint have flaked off. In recent years, one scholar has identified this painter to another known through his inscriptions as 'Ali Riza. 'Ali Riza was active in Ibrahim's Bijapur sultanate during the first half of the seventeenth century and was known for his documentary-style depictions. His career belongs to a period between the mid-sixteenth and late seventeenth centuries, during which manuscript and single-page painting flourished throughout the Deccan, an area comprising one of the most powerful and vital regions in India under the collective reign of five Muslim sultanates, including Bijapur.

The environment was ripe for cultural exchange, and artists, scholars, and traditions flowed freely between courts in Iran and the Deccan. This is evident in artistic, poetic, and musical production of the Deccan, which blends Persianate, European, and native Indian traditions. Sultan Ibrahim 'Adil Shah was known for his love of music, the arts,



and scholarship as well as for his personal religious eclecticism—suggested, for example, by the Hindu rosary he wears. The ruler sought to achieve accord with both his Muslim and non-Muslim subjects, supporting parallel developments in poetry and the arts in a variety of vernacular languages and traditions.

This brings us to a final aspect in this painting associated with portraits of Ibrahim ‘Adil Shah II. Remember that elephant in the distance, caparisoned with red and light green textile coverings and golden bells around its legs and body? This may represent the ruler’s favorite elephant, known as Atash Khan (*atash*, which comes from Persian, means “fire”). Throughout South Asian history, elephants were valued profoundly for their stately might, embodying royal power and inspiring comparisons to gods and kings. Portraits of elephants—in particular, of those known to have been in royal favor—emphasize the beloved role and elevated status these magnificent creatures held in India.

In the present case, the sparse composition, distantly rendered elephant, and reflective nature of Ibrahim ‘Adil Shah all lend a melancholy tone to the painting, which suggests it may illustrate a poem from Ibrahim’s *Kitab-i Nauras*. One of the landmarks of Deccani literature, the text contains the ruler’s commentary on Hindu aesthetics, or *rasa*, and focuses on Indian *ragas*, or musical modes, many of which are illustrated in paintings of the period. Perhaps this painting visualizes a section of the text, where Ibrahim ‘Adil Shah describes the pangs of separation he experiences whenever he leaves his beloved Atash Khan.

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



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