

The Allure of India

Company School Painting from Murshidabad & Patna 1795–1830

This exhibition focuses on the development of Company School style from 1795–1830 as seen in two sets of paintings made for British patrons in Bengal and in Bihar. These paintings reflect the taste and interests of East-India Company officers who were drawn to the romantic novelty of India and wished to record the exotic environment in which they lived. They commissioned pictures of Hindu and Muslim festivals and processions, weddings, court ceremonies as well as architectural monuments and ruins, including the Taj Mahal and the Red Fort in Agra. They also commissioned watercolours of their Neo-classical mansions, their estates often with their family *ensuite*, taking the air on elephant or palanquin. These paintings were executed by Indian artists trained in the style of contemporary British watercolourists.

Indigenous patronage from the Nawab of Bengal and his court at Murshidabad largely collapsed after the East India Company took over the governance of Bengal in 1765. Many Murshidabad artists who had previously worked in the traditional style of late Mughal painting found work in Calcutta in the architectural and engineering establishments, where they were trained as draftsmen and in European techniques of watercolour. Many also found work with individual British patrons who commissioned sets of drawings such as ours and some also found work assisting in the studios of visiting European artists, such as the Daniells and Solvyns.

While there was a small band of Britons and other Europeans in north India at this time who avidly collected traditional Mughal paintings, such work did not appeal to the majority of Europeans in India. The presence of European artists in Bengal in the late 18th century, such as A.W. Devis, Zoffany, William Hodges, George Farington, Francois Balthazar Solvyns and Robert Home served to encourage Bengali artists to expand their repertoire and to work in a medium that was more appealing to their new patrons than their traditional miniature technique.

Robert Home's album of drawings in the Victoria & Albert Museum contains many figure studies similar to ones found in Murshidabad paintings. Farington, who worked in Murshidabad from 1785–1788, was commissioned by Mubarak ud-Daula, Nawab of Murshidabad, to paint a series of topographical and festival oil paintings. He also painted a durbar scene for the British Resident of Murshidabad, Sir John Hadley D'Oyly, where he is depicted with the Nawab and other dignitaries. These paintings no longer exist but Mildred Archer believes contemporary Murshidabad artists based their compositions on these lost oil paintings as is the case with our painting (cat. 3).

A set of 12 Murshidabad watercolours (1795–1810)

The collector of the album from which our twelve Murshidabad paintings are taken is as yet unknown. The paintings were made for a British patron because the inscriptions on the back of the paintings are in English. These are stuck down onto album sheets with French translations on the back.

The loose watercolour style of these artists is conventionally called after Murshidabad, the place of the artist's origin and probable initial training, but most of these artists actually worked in Calcutta. The new patrons wanted pic-

tures of what they could see around them, paintings of festivals both Hindu and Muslim (cats. 1 & 2), processions, wedding ceremonies, important court occasions (cat. 3), of local sights (cats. 4 & 11) and of those further afield. There are also drawings of the Taj Mahal (cat. 9) and the Red Fort at Agra (cat. 6) which are based on sketches done by visiting European artists. Early views of these two Mughal monuments are rare. A fine study of a tree (cat. 11) reminds us of the work of the later artist Sita Ram and shows us the sort of milieu from which his work sprang (see Losty 2015). The most interesting painting in the group, from a historical point of view, is the rare view of the East India Company's factory at Cossimbazaar on the river Hooghly below Murshidabad (cat 4). A subject that has received little attention is the Palladian and Neoclassical mansions belonging to East India Company officers (cats. 5, 8 & 12). These paintings often bear the names of their owners/residents on the reverse, thus giving us a wealth of information.

A set of 9 Patna watercolours of festivals and processions (1820–1830)

Patna, capital of Bihar, had appeared briefly on the artistic horizon in the early 1760s, when Nawab Mir Qasim of Bengal moved his capital there during the war with the Company, taking his artists with him. Lady Impey's natural history artists in the 1770s and 1780s are also recorded as coming from Patna. Murshidabad artists began migrating to Patna again in the late 18th century as traditional patronage in Bengal waned. Initially they continued to paint sets of festival scenes, processions and interiors in the 'Murshidabad' style (for example the 1795–1800 set done for E.E. Pote, now in the British Library see Archer 1972, no 54).

The style changes with the work of Sevak Ram. He closely studied the works of the various British artists working in India, probably from the many sets of aquatints which were readily available. By using a different viewpoint to traditional Indian painting he was able to demonstrate his mastery of crowd scenes, and enlivened his paintings by including individualised seated or reclining figure studies in the foreground, clearly based on western models. Around 1807–12, Sevak Ram painted two different series of large festival scenes for aristocratic British patrons. The album was given to Lord Minto, Governor-General of Bengal (1807–1813) (now divided between the British Library, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Chester Beatty Library, see Archer 1972, no. 68; Archer 1992, no. 49; Leach 1995, pp. 762–763). And the other being the widely dispersed album made for the Earl of Caledon (see Eyre and Hobhouse 1982; Pal and Dehejia 1986, fig. 186; and the Francesca Galloway catalogue 2007, nos. 38–39). Sevak Ram's securely ascribed work consists of two paintings in the Minto album, the *Muharram Procession* in the V&A (Archer 1992, no. 49) and the *Scene in the Imambara* in the British Library (Archer 1972, pl. C). More ordinary paintings of occupations have also been attributed to him, on the basis of the Archers' informant in Patna, Ishvari Prasad, but these remain doubtful (e.g. Archer 1948, pp. 17–20, 1972, nos. 67 and 70, and 1992, no. 48).

Our set of nine paintings are rare examples of Patna painting on the grandest scale produced later than Sevak Ram, but still strongly influenced by his style. His descendants and successors (detailed in Archer 1948, refined in her 1972 and

1992 books) carried on painting such scenes on a smaller scale until well into the nineteenth century. Some of our large pictures seem to be after the work of Sevak Ram, but others seem more painted in his spirit and style or may be versions of Sevak Ram's paintings which no longer exist. Solemn and static though they may be, especially when compared with the more animated similar scenes from earlier Murshidabad artists, they allow us a glimpse of India in the early 19th century afforded by few other examples. The night scenes are especially interesting since these are unusual for Indian painting of this period and are virtually unknown in early 19th century British watercolour painting.

The subjects of our nine paintings are mostly processional scenes, especially those accompanying the Muharram festival (cats. 13–16) and weddings both Hindu and Muslim (cats. 17 & 18). Muharram is the first month of the Muslim calendar and is the month of mourning, commemorating the martyrdom of Hassan and Husayn, the grandsons of the Prophet. Shias carry *taziyas*, representations of their tombs, through the streets and listen to reciters recounting the events of their martyrdom in the Imambaras, brilliantly lit temporary structures where the *taziyas* remain stored. *Barats*, or processions both Hindu and Muslim conveying the bridegroom to the bride's house to be married, were also important occasions for showing off the bridegroom's family's wealth and power and figure prominently in these scenes, as well of course as the marriage ceremony itself (cat. 19). The only Hindu festival scene among this group is a Diwali scene where all the buildings are lit up by little oil lamps along their roofs and parapets and men are jostling to buy sweets and little clay images of the gods (cat. 20). Finally in the group is a picture of a widow committing *suttee* (cat. 21), that is becoming *sati* or 'a good woman' accompanying her dead husband to the after-life, a subject that fascinated Europeans but of which there are surprisingly few artistic representations.

This group of paintings was given to Sir Holburt Jacob Waring (1866–1953), a distinguished surgeon, by Sir Baber Shamsheer Jang Bahadur Rana (1888–1960), the second son of Maharaja Chandra Shamsheer Rana, hereditary Prime Minister of Nepal.

Literature

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A set of 12 Murshidabad watercolours (1795–1810)



1 *Holi festival in the palace at Murshidabad before the Nawab, with coloured powder flung around. Bengal sepoys standing about.*
Murshidabad, 1795–1810
Painting 48.5 × 74.5 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm
Another example is in the British Library (BL Hyde Collection Add.Or.3229, publ. Archer 1979, fig. 78)



2 *The Nawab attending the Muharram festival in the Imambara at Murshidabad, fully illuminated*
Murshidabad, 1795–1810
Painting 46.5 × 74 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm
A similar version is in the British Library (BL Hyde Collection Add.Or.3231).



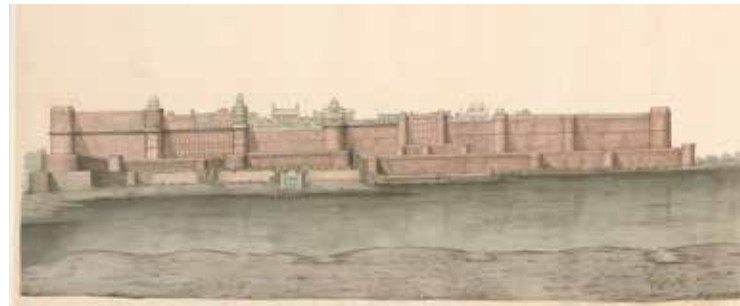
3 *Durbar of the Nawab Mubarak al-Daula (1770–93) of Murshidabad*
Murshidabad, 1795–1810
Painting 42.8 × 59.5 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm
He is seated on his throne, while Sir John Hadley D'Oyly, the Company's Resident, the young prince Babar 'Ali and a vizier are also seated in chairs. Apparently after a lost painting done in 1784 for D'Oyly by George Farington (Archer 1979, pp. 123–25). Other versions in the British Library Hyde Collection (Add.Or.3205) and in the V & A (Archer 1992, no. 42/1 and Das and Llewellyn-Jones, 2013 p.26).



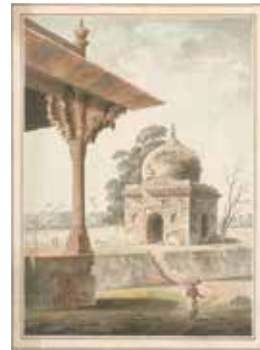
4 *View of the East India Company factory at Cossimbazar from the other side of the Hooghly river; inside its fortifications, flying the Union flag, with a pinnace budgerow (with the same flag) and a horse-headed boat on the river (vieille fattorie de Bassembazar)*
Murshidabad, 1795–1810; Painting 46 × 66 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm
The latter boat is very much in Sita Ram's manner as are the ferryboat and the man on shore with the tulsi (sacred basil) altar. This scene also exists in the British Library (BL Hyde Collection Add.Or.3192).



5 *A double-storeyed house with single-storeyed wings beside a reservoir with a family approaching by elephant and palanquin*
Murshidabad, 1795–1810
Painting 38.5 cm × 57.2 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm



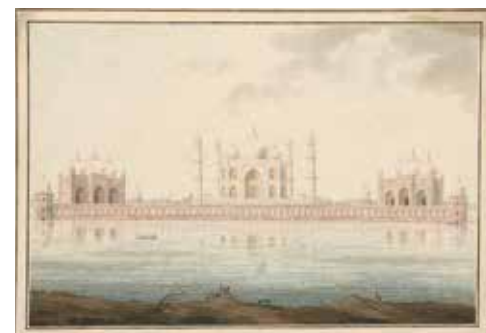
6 *The Agra Fort viewed from across the river*
Murshidabad, 1795–1810
Painting 40 × 88.5 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm; folded at right edge



7 *The tomb of Shaikh Ibrahim Chishti (d. 1543) seen from the corner of the Nadan Mahal, Lucknow, an Akbari period structure (Mosque Lucnow)*
Murshidabad, 1795–1810
Painting 48.5 × 37 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm
Two other versions of this scene are in the British Library (BL Wellesley Add.Or.1136, Hyde Collection Add.Or.3216; publ. Das and Llewellyn-Jones 2013, p. 100).



8 *Large two-storeyed house with steps and classical pediment, surrounded by other houses in a compound (Nisehawdbaugh maintenant en possession de M Roile)*
Murshidabad, 1795–1810
Painting 40.5 × 57.7 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm
Another version is in the British Library (BL Wellesley Add.Or.1137 without inscription). The house is named after one of the famous Mughal gardens of Kashmir, the Nishat Bagh.



9 *The Taj Mahal from across the river (Tadjemehall sur la Jamna)*
Murshidabad, 1795–1810
Painting 38.5 × 57 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm
The tonality of this watercolour is associated with Sita Ram.



10 *The tomb of Maryam az-Zamani, the Emperor Jahangir's mother, at Sikandra*
Murshidabad, 1795–1810
Painting 28.8 × 41 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm
A Mughal platform tomb with five chattris or cupolas. Two other watercolours of this view are in the British Library (BL Wellesley Add.Or.1145, Hyde Collection Add.Or.3218).



11 *A large banyan tree with Mughal buildings behind with travellers on the road*
Murshidabad, 1795–1810
Painting 31.2 × 41.2 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm
The same view is in the British Library Hyde Collection (Add.Or.3210) and identifies the site as the sacred banyan tree and temple at Joucalla between Kaliyanpur and Berhampore.



12 *View of a single-storey house with portico over a raised platform with divided staircase; circular driveway and garden showing family and friends at their leisure*
Murshidabad, 1795–1810
Painting 35.8 × 53.5 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm

A set of 9 Patna watercolours of festivals and processions (1820–1830)



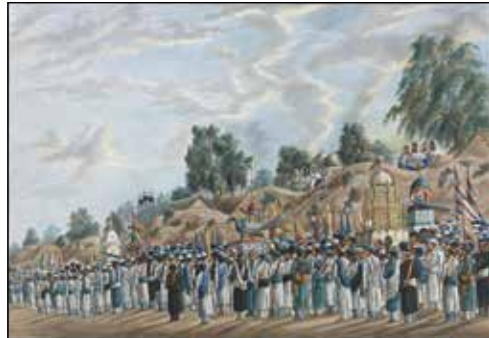
13 *Prayers and recitations at the Imambara during the Muharram*
Patna, 1820–30
40 × 58 cm



16 *Muharram procession by night*
Patna, 1820–30
40 × 57.7 cm



19 *A Muslim marriage ceremony*
Patna, 1820–30
58.8 × 39.2 cm



14 *Muharram procession of the Taziyas*
Patna, 1820–30
40 × 57.8 cm



17 *A Hindu marriage procession*
Patna, 1820–30
40 × 58 cm



20 *A street scene at Diwali by night with stalls of sweet sellers and image sellers*
Patna, 1820–30
40 × 57.5 cm



15 *Muharram procession by night*
Patna, 1820–30
40 × 57.7 cm



18 *A Muslim wedding procession by night*
Patna, 1820–30
40 × 57.7 cm



21 *A widow with the burning corpse of her husband becoming a sati*
Patna, 1820–30
40 × 57.7 cm

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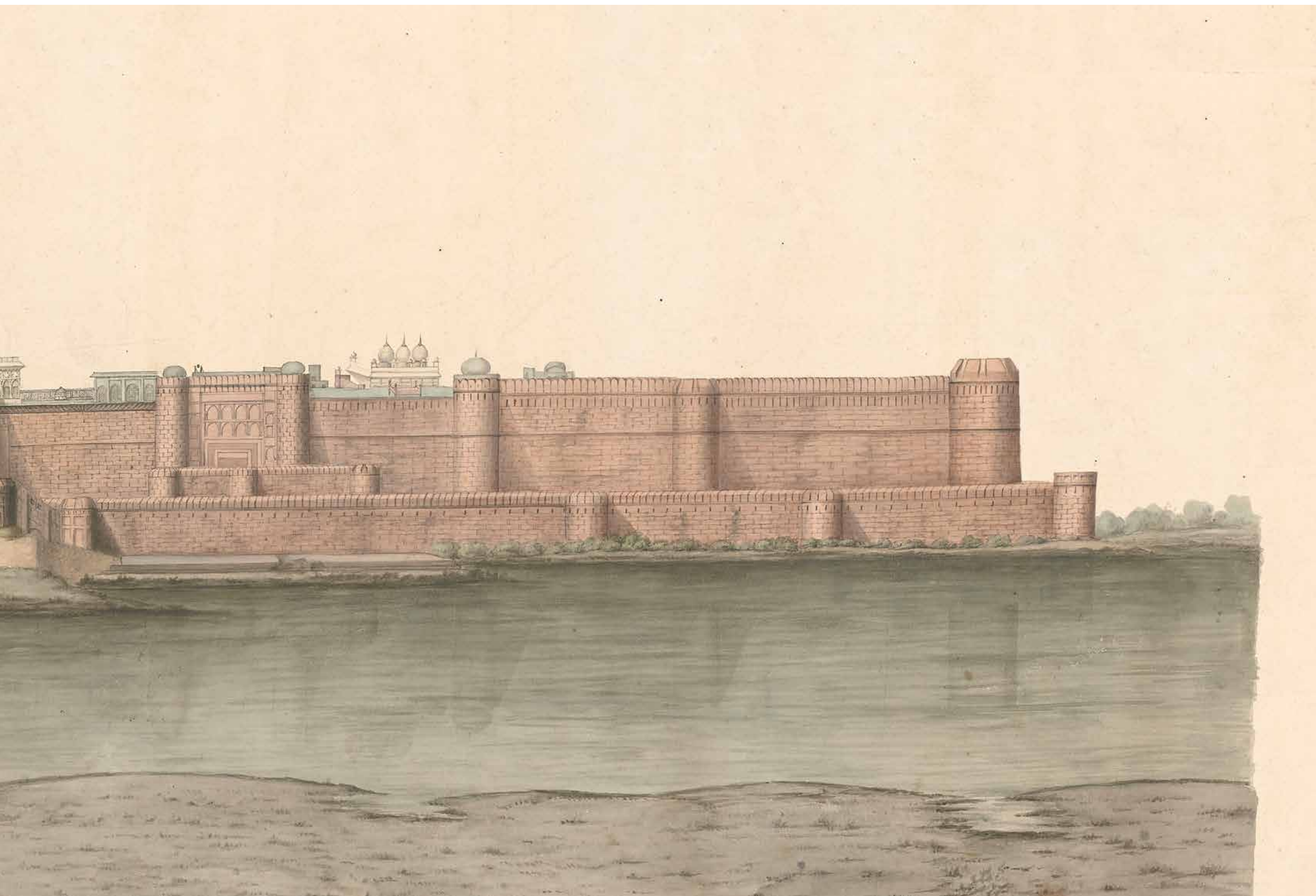
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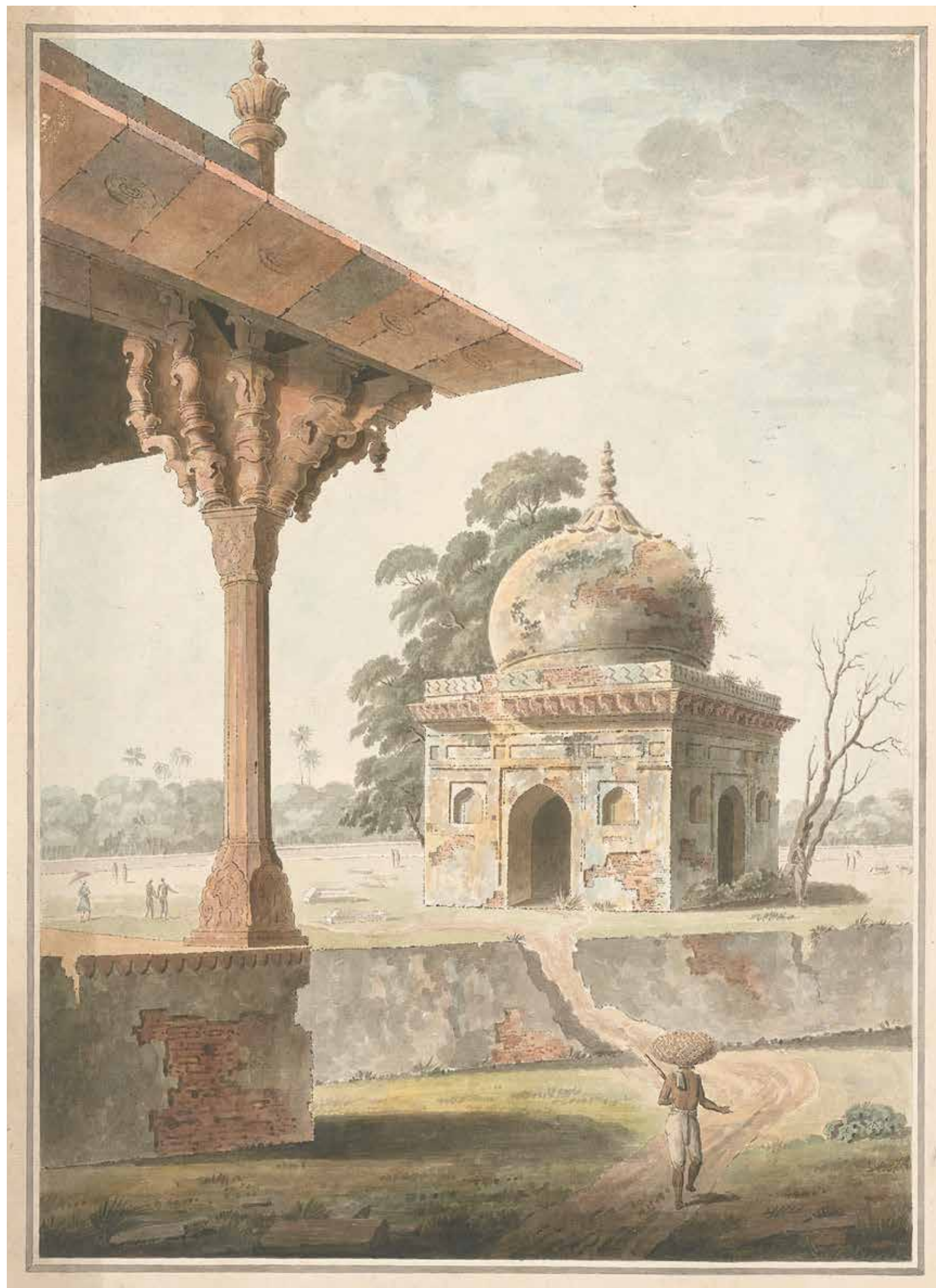


5 A double-storeyed house with single-storeyed wings beside a reservoir; Murshidabad, 1795–1810; Painting 38.5 cm × 57.2 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm

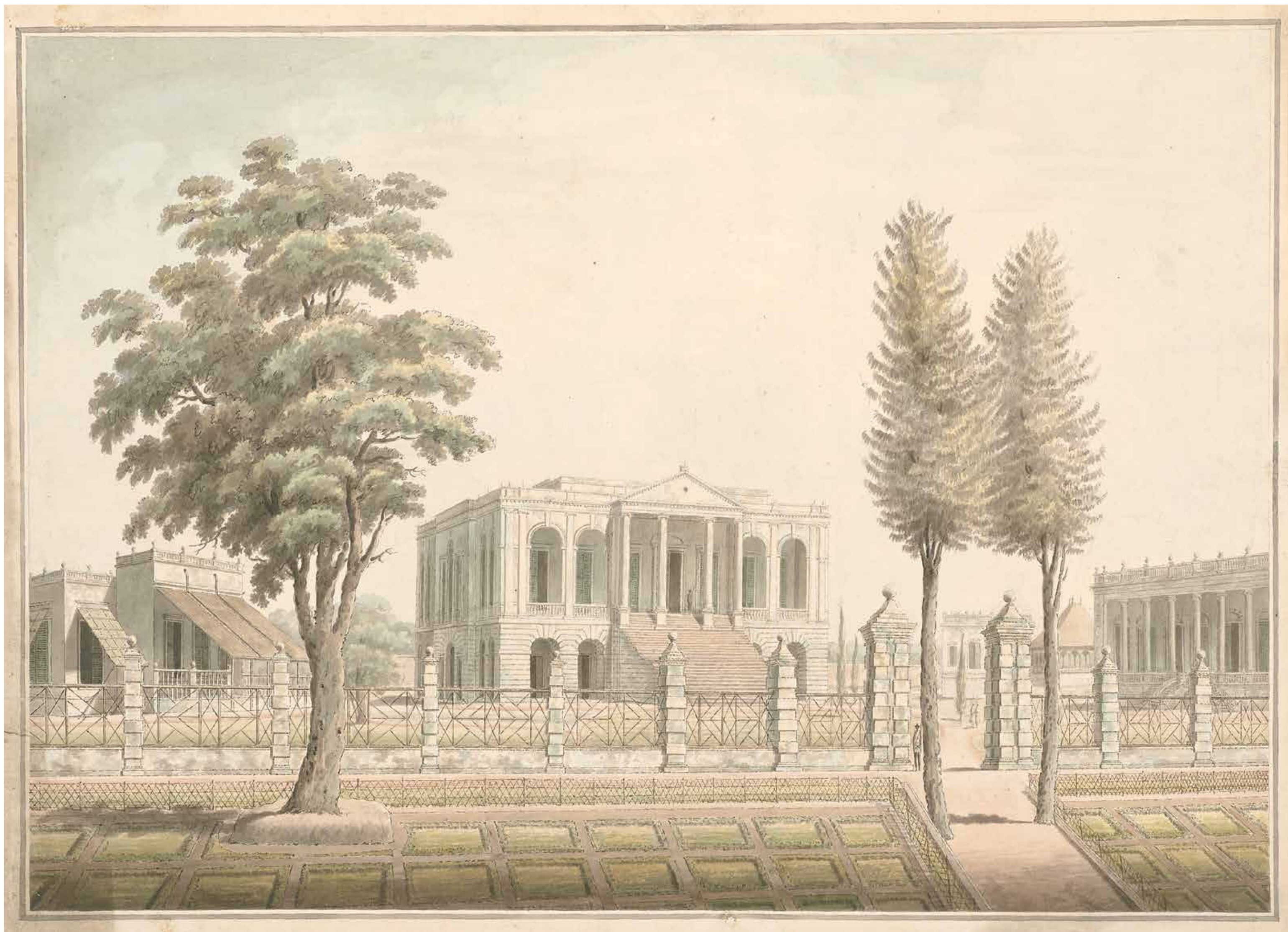


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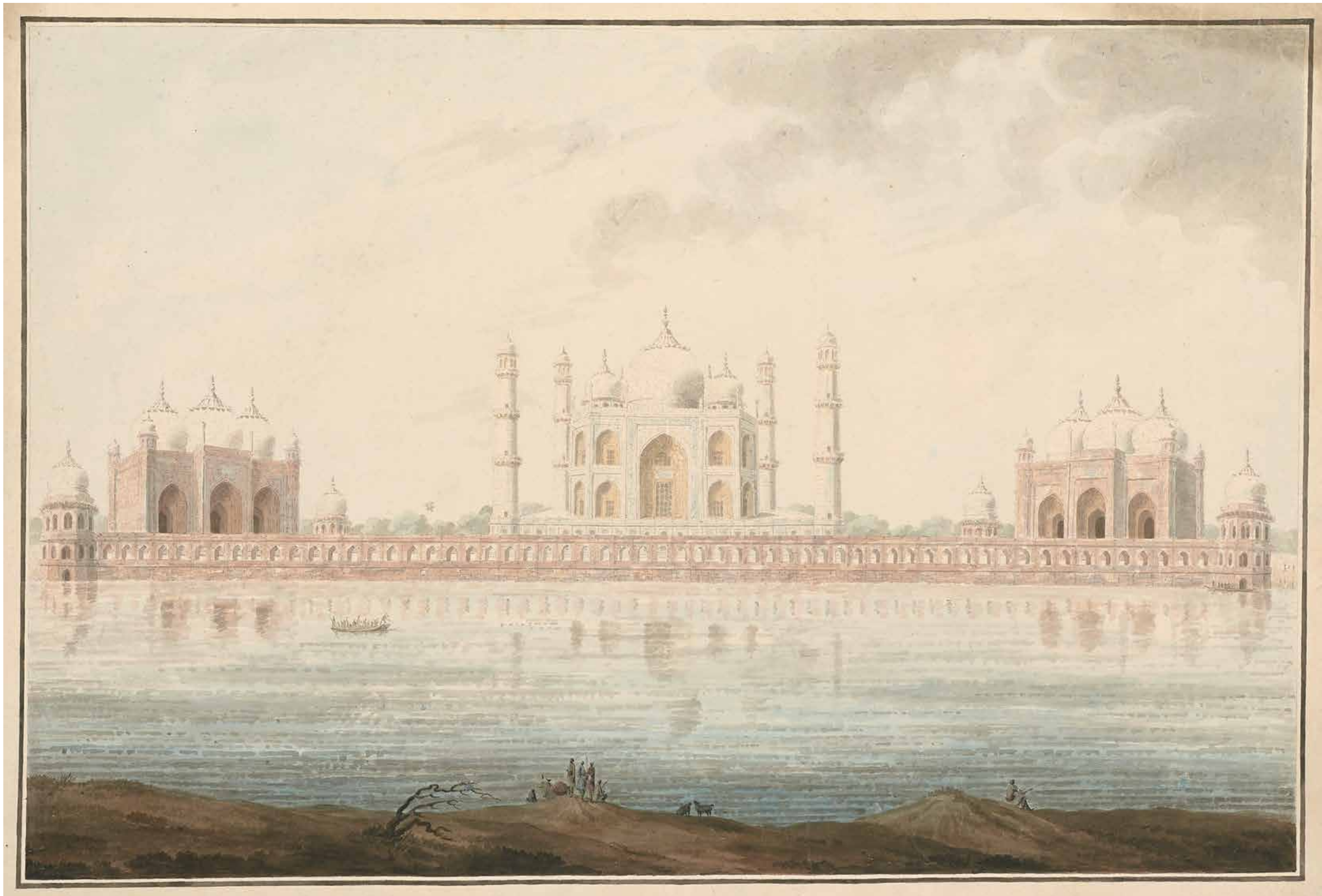


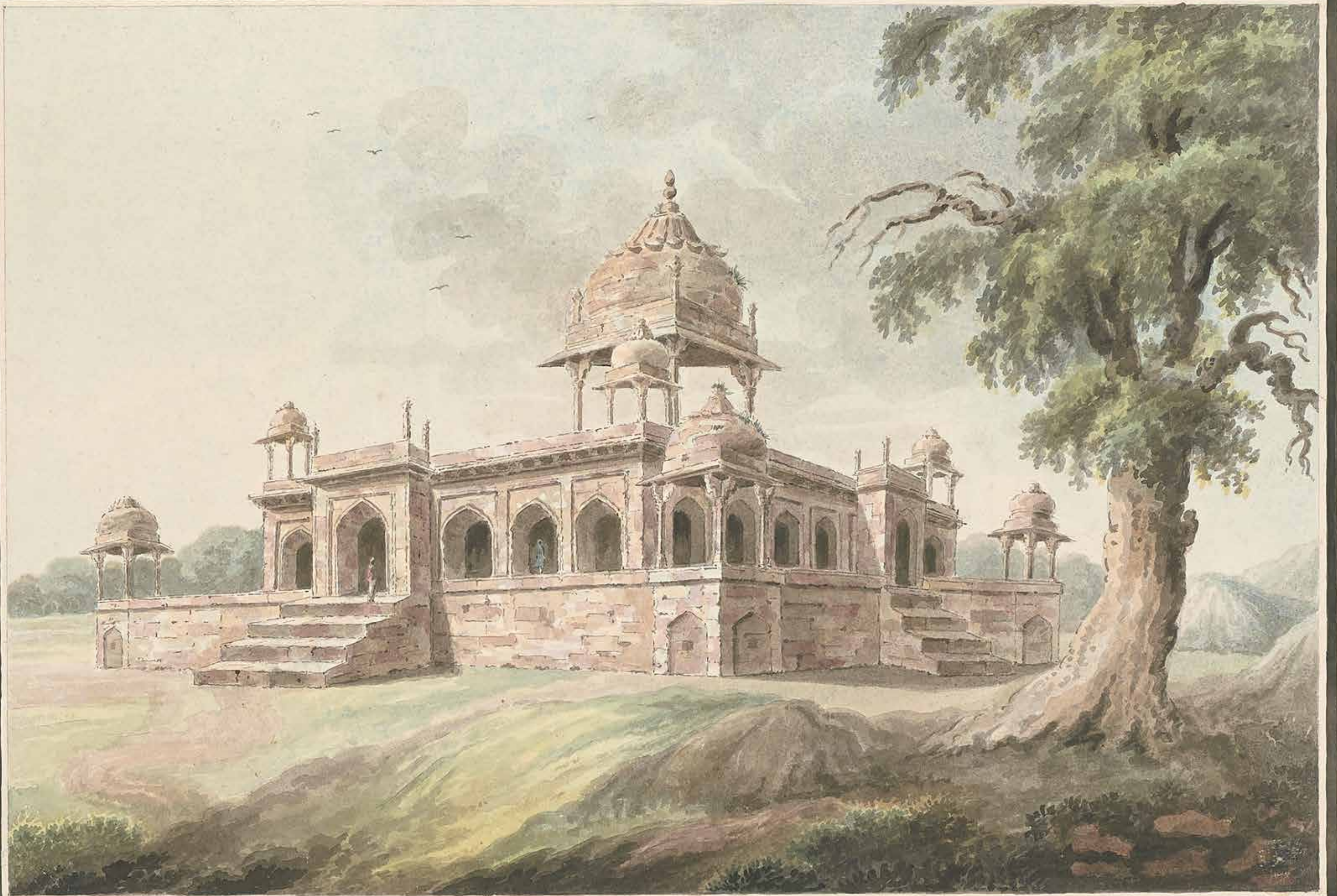


7 The tomb of Shaikh Ibrahim Chishti (d. 1543), Murshidabad, 1795–1810; Painting 48.5 × 37 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm



8 Large two-storeyed house with steps and classical pediment; Murshidabad, 1795–1810; Painting 40.5 × 57.7 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm







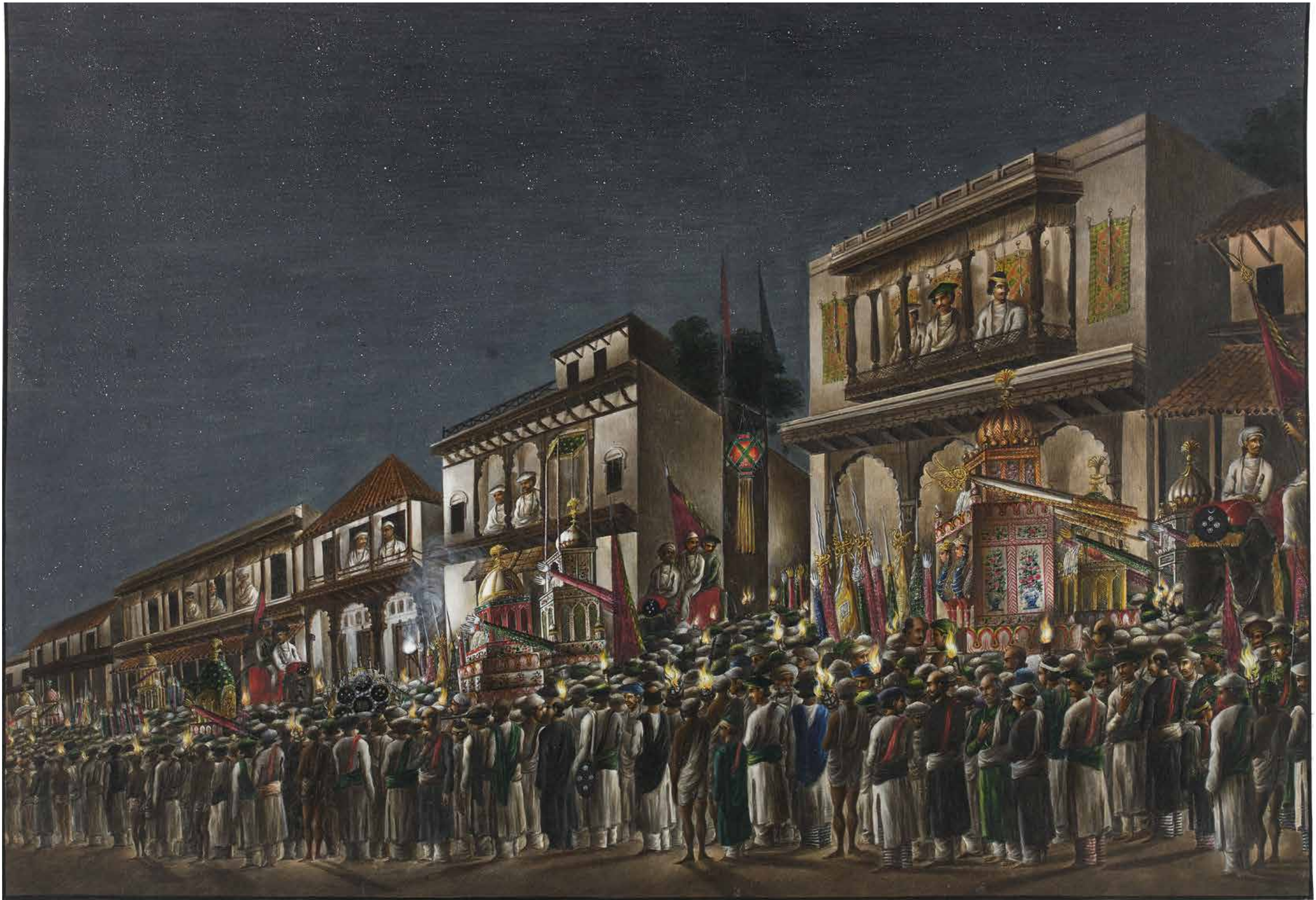
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12 View of a single-storey house with portico over a raised platform; Murshidabad, 1795–1810; Painting 35.8 × 53.5 cm; Folio 50 × 77 cm



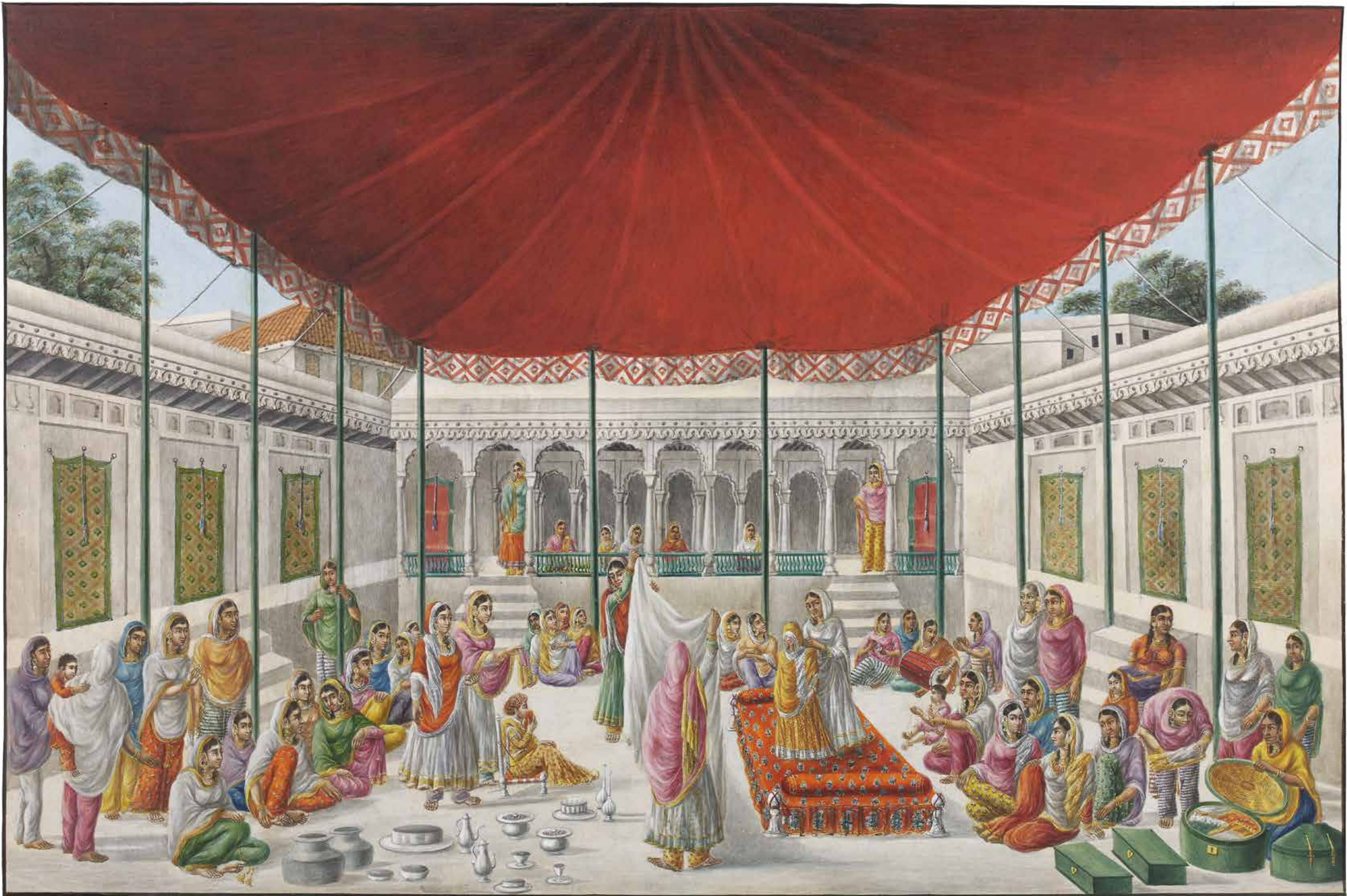
















21 *A widow with the burning corpse of her husband becoming a sati*; Patna, 1820–30; 40 × 57.7 cm