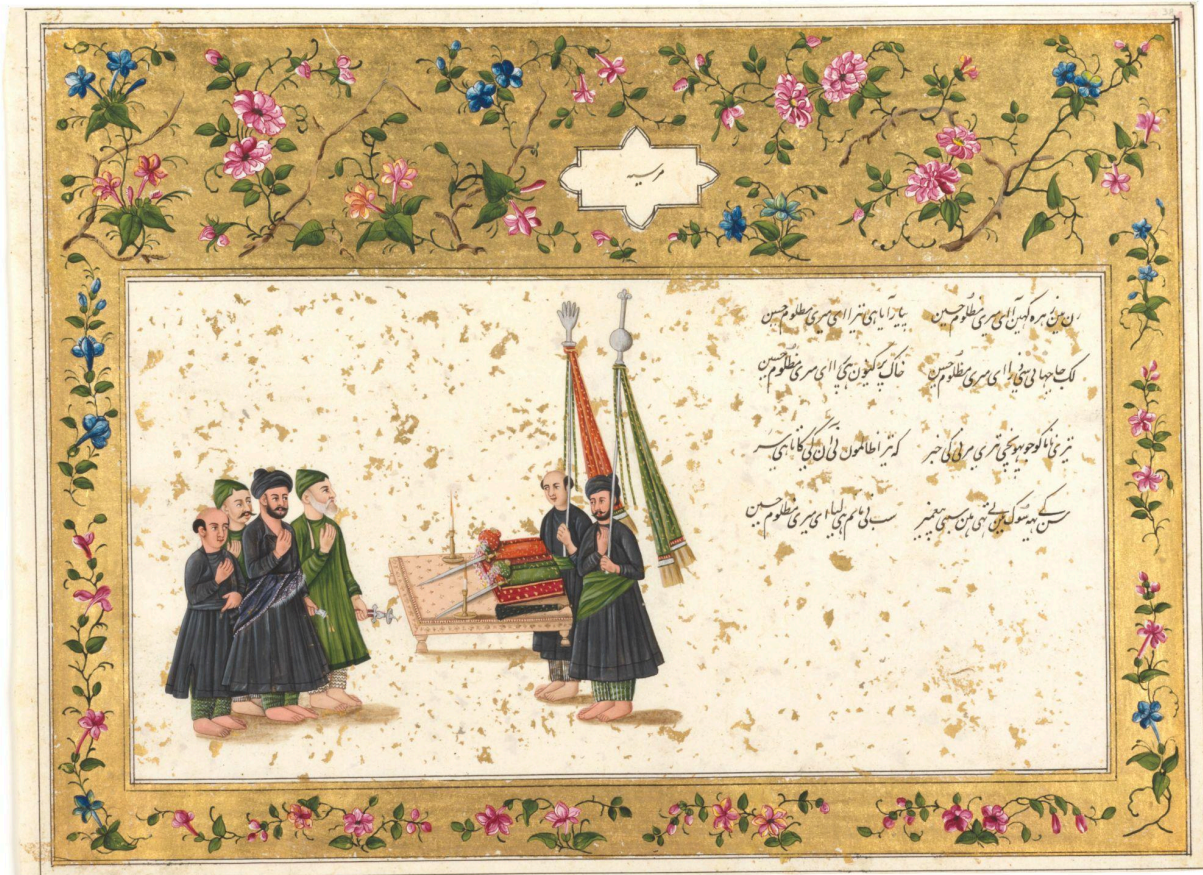


Press release

A Mughal Songbook: Art, Music and Empire

8 September 2026 – 7 March 2027

The Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge



Urdu marsiya, Book of Songs, commissioned by Sophia Elizabeth Plowden, India, Lucknow, around 1787–88. The Fitzwilliam Museum, given by Joan Pernel Strachey and Philippa Strachey, 1942

Opening this autumn at the Fitzwilliam Museum, *A Mughal Songbook: Art, Music and Empire* explores the Plowden songbook – a manuscript that fostered a cross-cultural appreciation of Hindustani music. Containing seventy-seven songs written in Persian, Urdu, Classical Hindi, and Punjabi, the songbook offers a rare glimpse at the visual and performing arts of late Mughal South Asia, illuminating the interconnected worlds of singers, dancers, courtesans, poets, patrons, and the books and objects that they treasured.

At the heart of the display is the story of Sophia Elizabeth Plowden (1751–1834) and her illustrated book of lyrics and musical notation, created in Lucknow in 1787–88. Through its pages, Plowden documented the music she encountered in North Indian courtly gatherings during a period of transition between the Mughal and British Empires. The manuscript later inspired the colonial phenomenon of ‘Hindustani Airs’ – songs sung in India adapted for performance by British elites on the harpsichord. Through paintings, manuscripts, textiles, and sound, the exhibition reanimates the sensory world of late Mughal culture, evoking the music, images, and textures of a vibrant artistic milieu.

The display’s opening section explores the diverse figures who shaped the flourishing musical and performance culture of late Mughal South Asia. Paintings of musicians, poets, dancers, and celebrated courtesans such as Khanum Jan reveal the central role of performance within courtly life. The display also introduces influential cultural patrons and intermediaries, including the Mughal emperor Shah ‘Alam II, Sophia Plowden herself, and Antoine Polier, the Swiss military officer and collector who commissioned works featured in the exhibition.

A Mughal Songbook also examines the role of the East India Company in consolidating British rule in India, and how its officials collected and commissioned books, paintings, and objects in an attempt to understand – and ultimately control – Indian cultural life. The Plowden songbook exemplifies this colonial impulse: a manuscript born from fascination and admiration, yet also shaped by structures of imperial power that sought to document, circulate, and appropriate the art of Hindustani performance across the British Empire.

The songbook’s intricate illustrations capture fleeting moments of pleasure, play and performance. The exhibition’s second section offers intimate glimpses into this world, from women flying kites to scenes celebrating the spring festival of Holi. Three paintings from the Fitzwilliam Museum’s celebrated Ragamala series – visualisations of musical modes – will also be displayed. Throughout the gallery, visitors will hear performances of Hindustani music adapted for the European harpsichord by musician Jane Chapman, bringing the manuscript’s musical legacy to life.

Architecture and design formed an essential backdrop to performance culture across Mughal South Asia, and were documented by British colonial administrators and travellers. Expanding beyond the Plowden songbook itself, the exhibition evokes the broader geography of late Mughal artistic exchange, tracing the dispersal of talent from Delhi to regional centres such as Lucknow and Agra. Highlights include a book of watercolours depicting the Taj Mahal and other sites in Agra, alongside monumental early nineteenth-century textile panels from Delhi.

Together, the objects, paintings, and music in *A Mughal Songbook: Art, Music and Empire* seek to revive the world of performance culture in eighteenth-century Lucknow. The exhibition shows how musicians, dancers, poets, and artists shaped a rich and playful artistic

environment whose impact extended far beyond South Asia, inspiring musical fashions across Europe even as British colonial power expanded across the subcontinent.

‘There are so many untapped Indo-Islamic treasures like the Plowden songbook to be discovered in Cambridge’s collections. I am delighted that the Fitzwilliam Museum’s visitors will be able to experience its paintings and music, along with all the research we have pursued to make its historical context come alive’, says the display’s curator, Dr Vivek Gupta.

A Mughal Songbook: Art, Music and Empire is curated by Dr Vivek Gupta, former Research Associate at the Centre for Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge. It is supported by the Marlay Group.

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Notes to Editors

Gallery 14

Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB

Open Tuesday–Saturday, 10am–5pm, Sunday and Bank Holidays 12–5pm

Free entry

<https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/plan-your-visit/exhibitions/a-mughal-songbook-art-music-and-empire>

About the Fitzwilliam Museum

The Fitzwilliam Museum is home to one of the world’s most remarkable university art collections. We care for works of art and material culture primarily from Europe, North Africa and Asia that connect people across cultures and time. Since 1816 we’ve been a place for learning and discovery. Today, we use art, objects, spaces and experiences to inspire curiosity, reflection and creativity – opening up the past to transform our futures. As an internationally recognised centre for research and conservation, we work with partners across the world to explore how collections can be better understood, cared for and shared.

www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk