



Untitled [Standing Woman in Yellow Holding a Lotus]

Date

early 19th century

Medium

Gouache and gold over white ground on paper

Description

In India, after the reign of Akbar the Great (1556–1605), portraiture came to dominate art production, outstripping narrative scenes in popularity, and became ever more naturalistic. In this example, the subject is portrayed in a traditional manner, from her striding stance to the lotus flower she holds, but her clothing is depicted in great detail, modeled to reveal distinct layers of gauzy garments. She wears a loose pair of silk trousers called pajama, slippers called jhuti, a diaphanous veil edged in and embroidered with gold, and extensive jewelry, also finished with gilding. The work was likely produced toward the end of the Mughal Empire (1526–1857), a long period of artistic innovation spurred by the melding of a number of cultures and traditions. The empire dissolved in 1858, when the British crown secured control after years of increasing power on the part of the British East India Company in northern India. The portrait was given to the Emerson Gallery in 1986 by the art historian and curator Dorothy C. Miller.

In 1934, Miller began to work for the recently opened Museum of Modern Art in New York, first as assistant to the director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and eventually rising to senior curator, until her retirement in 1969. Miller may have become aware of the Emerson Gallery through her acquaintance with William G. Roehrick, Class of 1934, H1971, or through professional channels when the Root Art Center hosted two traveling exhibitions organized by MoMA, in 1966 and 1967. (SOURCE: Alcauskas, INNOVATIVE APPROACHES, HONORED TRADITIONS, 2017) "British imperialism, political unrest, and economic expansion characterize 19th century India. As the Mogul empire declined and its Muslim elite began to lose its power over India in the early 1700s, European nations vied for control over different Indian territories. Britain's East India company achieved military success in India, monopolizing trade and eventually establishing a judicial court system in the early 19th century. However, their growing authority and acquisition of land caused internal tensions and Indian resentment. Thousands of Indian troops executed a massive uprising against their British commanders in 1857. The British crown intervened, eventually stopping the mutiny with more military support. The crown then assumed control over India, abolishing the British East India company and reigning peacefully until the turn of the 20th century. India is home to a multitude of religions, sects, castes, linguistic groups, and more. This ethnic diversity is a defining feature of the nation, as citizens inhabiting different regional territories range in cultural practices, beliefs, and lifestyles. The official language is Hindi, but the constitution recognizes twenty-two languages. India's tradition of arts and crafts exemplifies its rich, cultural dynamic nature. In part due to foreign influences and interactions, Indian art has continuously evolved to express the prevailing attitudes and culture of each period in history. Cave paintings, stone sculptures, metal casting, and religious manuscript drawings comprise the early art tradition. Muslim rulers in the 15th and 15th century promoted the development of a specific kind of craft: miniature paintings. This style of art often depicted religious scenes, folklore, and daily life. Under 19th century British rule, skilled artisans began adopt to European techniques such as watercolor and incorporate them into their traditional craftsmanship. Untitled [The Standing Woman in Yellow Holding a Lotus] was most likely created by a Rajput painting, as its intricacy and preciousness is characteristic of the Rajput style. This popular style emerged as the quintessential art of the royal courts of the Rajut people, the Hindu ruling class of India. Thus, an aristocrat most likely commissioned this portrait. A work of this nature was usually positioned on the ground propped up against a wall so that viewers could admire it sitting. The woman depicted in this piece represents ideal feminine beauty. The gentle flow and draping of her attire compliment her other soft, elegant features. Her gold jewelry highlights her elevated status as an elite member of society. The lotus she holds symbolizes her purity and divine beauty, as the flower grows in muddy waters, yet emerges pristine and beautiful." (Written by Annelise Vought, Class of 2019)

Dimensions

Sheet: 13 in. × 8 1/2 in. (33 × 21.6 cm)

