

Project Title: Remembering the Friends of God: An Unclaimed Genre of Indian Devotional Portraiture

My project aims to survey and map an unclaimed genre of Muslim devotional portraiture within the field of South Asian painting. Consisting of seventeenth to nineteenth century depictions of Muslim saints, this important branch of painting provides a fascinating window into instances of trans-sectarian sharing between Muslim and Hindu devotional cultures in early modern India. The icon-like portraits of Sufi saints are a unique figural manifestation of the Islamic encounter with the indigenous Hindu concept of viewing as ritual (darshan). It is my contention that a serious study of representational tropes within Indo-Muslim devotional imagery has the potential to destabilize the rigid sectarian boundaries that have impeded discussion of the long tradition of Hindu-Muslim transculturation. Unfortunately, in the historiography of miniature painting, the regions allocated to Pakistan after partition are largely ignored. A key component of my research is to show how centers such as Lahore and Kashmir were instrumental in the development of 18th century painting in Punjab. Many of the saints depicted in Mughal and Punjabi painting are associated with these two centers. Through a careful visual analysis aided by an investigation of primary texts, I aim to chart the shifting functionality of saints' depictions, from sanctioning temporal authority to aids for spiritual remembrance.