

## Taj Mahal: Memorial to Love

From the Public Broadcasting web site:

[http://www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld/a\\_nav/taj\\_nav/main\\_tajfrm.html](http://www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld/a_nav/taj_nav/main_tajfrm.html)

There are other links on the page to additional information about Shah Jahan and the Taj Mahal. That information is not required.

### **Description of the Taj Mahal:**

The Mughals were followers of the Islamic faith. The promise of Allah, as written in the Koran, is inscribed in marble on the portal of the main entrance to the Taj Mahal.

Symbolic of the gateway through which Mohammed entered Paradise, it is a place of transition between the world of the senses and realm of the spirit.

Images of Paradise were widespread in both literature and art in the Mughal period, and each part of the Taj complex seems to correspond allegorically to a cosmological model of the gardens of Paradise on the Day of Resurrection: the mausoleum stands like the throne of judgment at the far end of the grounds (rather than the traditional placement in the center of a four-part garden); the forty-two acres of grounds are divided by four channels of water representing the four rivers of Paradise described in the Koran; and red sandstone walls topped with gazebos, galleries and towers mark the boundaries of Paradise.

"As you enter the gate, the Taj is framed within the doorway, and it looks small and very dainty," says art historian Shobita Punja. "But as you walk closer to it, its magnificence just takes over." Reflected in a long pool is the mausoleum in all its majesty. The dome floats two hundred and fifty feet into the sky, its simplicity and proportions perfect, subtle variations in the veined marble creating changes in color with every mood of the heavens. Four minarets frame the space like the setting of a jewel. From each one the call to worship would have reminded all within hearing to give Allah praise.

According to Islamic tradition, a woman who dies in childbirth is a martyr, and her memorial a place of pilgrimage. The Taj Mahal is dedicated to the Empress Mumtaz Mahal who died in childbirth. Two structures face the Taj from either side: a mosque on the west, and its mirror image, a rest house, on the east, perhaps built to provide symmetry and balance for the mosque and to shelter the faithful who would come to pay homage to Mumtaz Mahal.

"The sky forms a curtain to the Taj," adds Shobita. "It's the backdrop. At night, when the sky is black, this little marble jewel box stands glistening in the moonlight; in the early morning, when the sky is pink and orange, the white marble reflects those colors; and at sunset it has a completely different look. So the sky is as important as any other physical detail around the Taj. And the way it's set on that platform, standing up against the huge expanse of sky, it seems as though they were evoking a sort of heavenly curtain to play a part in the scheme of things."

From afar the Taj appears seamless, but moving closer reveals an intricate harmony of details. Inlaid calligraphy flows with all the freedom of a pen moving across paper.

Jewel-studded walls display exquisitely detailed flowers. "You've got inlay work of flowers about three inches high where they use as many as sixty to seventy pieces of precious gemstones to show the curve of a leaf or the turn of a petal. I mean it's so delicate!" says Shobita.

"The Taj, as an experience, is simply an extraordinary building," says art historian Milo Beach. "The proportion of the Taj, the workmanship of the Taj, the effect of the Taj in the landscape of the garden, the effect of light playing over the surface of white marble... From every angle, the Taj is a building of extraordinary physical balance. Whether you know anything about India or about Indian architecture at all, it's a beautifully crafted building."

Stately in size, pleasing in proportion, rich yet restrained in decoration, the Taj Mahal is said to be the most perfect building in the world. "The Taj is the synthesis of many religions, many architectural forms, many artistic traditions," says art historian Shobita Punja. "That's why it's so perfect. It's a symbol of perfect love and of great beauty."

"But the wear on the monument from the many thousands of people who visit every year is really taking its toll, and the marble is being affected by pollution as well. The Taj has many problems, and I think it's important to let people know that we need to preserve the Taj. " It's the symbol of India, a very precious symbol of our cultural heritage."

### **History of the Taj Mahal:**

Long long ago, in a land called Hindustan, reigned a dynasty of Kings as cultured as they were courageous... It isn't that they were without fault – they could be cruel and cunning warriors – but they were also men of exceptionally good taste, and blessed with the bountiful means to express their vision, they built a splendid empire of beauty, knowledge and grace beyond any known before.

Now there was one among them, known as "King of the World," whose heart's passion burned like fire, and who built a monument for the sake of love that would capture the imagination of the world.

At the age of fifteen, the prince who would be called King of the World met a refined and highborn young girl at a bazaar within the walls of the royal palace in Agra. Court poets celebrated the girl's extraordinary beauty. "The moon," they said, "hid its face in shame before her." For both, it was love at first sight. Five years would pass before the auspicious day chosen for their wedding, and from that moment, they became inseparable companions.

Prince Khurram was the fifth son of the Emperor Jahangir, who ruled in the country now known as India in the sixteenth century. Although the prince was not the eldest son, he soon became the favorite. "Gradually as his years increased, so did his excellence," wrote Jahangir. "In art, in reason, in battle, there is no comparison between him and my other children." At his father's command, Prince Khurram led many military campaigns to consolidate the empire, and in honor of his numerous victories, Jahangir granted him the title "Shah Jahan", "King of the World", a tribute never before paid to an as yet uncrowned Mughal king.

But when Jahangir's health failed, his sons rivaled for succession to the throne. Ultimately, after years of battle and the deaths of his brothers under suspicious circumstances, Shah Jahan was victorious. In 1628, the King of the World ascended the throne in a ceremony of unrivaled splendor. Beside him stood his queen, his comrade and confidante. He titled her "Mumtaz Mahal", "Chosen One of the Palace", and commissioned for her a luxurious royal residence of glistening white marble. In turn, she gave him tender devotion, wise counsel and children – many children – to insure the continuance of the magnificent Mughal dynasty.

The reign of Shah Jahan marked the long summer of Mughal rule, a peaceful era of prosperity and stability. It was also an age of outrageous opulence, and a time when some of the world's largest and most precious gems were being mined from India's soil. According to author and art historian Milo Beach, "Jewels were the main basis of wealth, and there were literally trunks of jewels in the imperial treasury, trunks of emeralds, sapphires, rubies and diamonds. Shah Jahan inherited it all. He had immense wealth and tremendous power and palaces all over the country." The splendor of his court outshone those of his father and grandfather. Inscribed in gold on the arches of his throne were the words, "If there be paradise on earth, it is here."

But in this world, there is an ancient tradition: sweet pleasure is not without bitterness...

In 1631, in the fourth year of his reign, Shah Jahan set out for Burhanpur with his armies to subdue a rebellion. Even though Mumtaz Mahal was in the ninth month of a pregnancy, she accompanied him as she had done many times before. On a warm evening of April in 1631, the queen gave birth to their fourteenth child, but soon afterwards suffered complications and took a turn for the worse. According to legend, with her dying breath, she secured a promise from her husband on the strength of their love: to build for her a mausoleum more beautiful than any the world had ever seen before.

The King cried out with grief, like an ocean raging with storm... He put aside his royal robes and for the whole week afterward, His Majesty did not appear in public, nor transact any affairs of state. From constant weeping he was forced to use spectacles, and his hair turned gray.

Shah Jahan grieved for two years. By official opinion, he never again showed enthusiasm for administering the realm. His only solace would be found in the world of art and architecture, and an obsession with perfection that would last his lifetime. Six months after the death of his wife, he laid the foundation for her memorial across the Jamuna River near his palace in Agra... the jewel of India, the far-famed Taj Mahal.

Pearly pink at dawn and opalescent by moonlight, Mumtaz Mahal's tomb is so delicately ethereal that it threatens to disappear during Agra's white-heat afternoons. In the center of the mausoleum lie the remains of the Empress. Subdued light filters through the delicate screens surrounding her cenotaph and mullahs chant verses from the Koran. It is here that Shah Jahan came with his children to honor the memory of his beloved wife. Here, at last, he found solace.

But Shah Jahan's tranquility was suddenly shattered when his son Aurangzeb assailed the throne. Just as Shah Jahan had conspired against his brothers for Jahangir's empire, so did his own son plot against him. In 1658, Aurangzeb declared himself emperor and imprisoned his father in a tower of the Red Fort in Agra. For Shah Jahan, King of the World, who once commanded the unbounded wealth of an empire, his only consolation would be a view across the Jamuna River to his vision of Paradise.

Shah Jahan created his vision of the world, not as it is, but rather as it should be – harmonious, graceful and pure. Inspired by love and shaped to perfection, the Taj Mahal immortalizes one man's love for his wife and the splendor of an era.

Let the splendor of the diamond, pearl and ruby vanish like the magic shimmer of the rainbow. Only let this one teardrop, the Taj Mahal, glisten spotlessly bright on the cheek of time...

(Poet: Rabindranath Tagore, 1861 – 1941)