LOT 147

A PRINCESS, IDENTIFIED AS NUR JAHAN, SMOKING A HUQQA ON A TERRACE WITH DELHI IN THE DISTANCE, INDIA, MUGHAL, SIGNED BY NIDHA MAL, MUGHAL, CIRCA 1740

gouache with gold on paper, signed at left edge of terrace Nidha Mal, borders of cream paper with gold lattice motifs, extensive inscriptions on reverse (see below)
painting: 25.1 by 16.1cm. leaf: 30.8 by 21.8cm.

ESTIMATE 30,000-40,000 GBP

PROVENANCE
In Venice in 1894

CATALOGUE NOTE
This is an interesting and important work by the eighteenth-century Mughal artist Nidha Mal, one of Emperor Muhammad Shah's most skilled artists. His career began at Delhi and he remained there throughout Muhammad Shah's reign (1719-48), after which he moved to Lucknow. His works are characterised by great delicacy and acute
The signature of Nidha Mal on the present work is positioned on an area where some flaking of the pigments has occurred and some re-touching has been applied. However, very close examination under magnification shows the edges of the original letters, confirming the presence of the signature before the re-touching. The composition and general style of the figures, terrace, tree and distant landscape all fit within his oeuvre, and in addition the two females here have physiognomies that are rather distinctive and almost constitute a signature motif of Nidha Mal. There is a certain shape to the slightly pouting lips and gently up-curved nose that appears in many of Nidha Mal's figures, both male and female. For example: several of the figures in Muhammad Shah with Courtiers, of circa 1735 (San Diego Museum, Edwin Binney Collection, see T. McInerney, Mughal Paintings during the Reign of Muhammad Shah’ in B. Schmitz (ed.), After the Great Mughals, Painting in Delhi and Regional Courts in the 18th and 19th Centuries, Marg, Mumbai, Vol.53, no.4, June 2002, p.25, fig.10), a portrait of an Avadhi official (see ibid, fig.3, p.4); a larger group scene of an Avadhi official on a terrace (ibid, fig.4, p.5); a terrace scene of a prince reclining with female attendants (Sotheby's New York, 27 March 1991, lot 88).

The nineteenth century notes on the reverse identify the figures as Nur Jahan, wife of Emperor Jahangir, with her maid of honour Sikander Banu Mumtaz Begum and the distant landscape as a view of Delhi and the surrounding country: The English inscription in brown ink is a translation of the Persian inscription in black ink at the top, which may be original to the miniature or added soon after its execution. The English translation, written by a certain Mahmud Mir (who is described as the "Pundit of the Jeypore Museum") at Venice in 1894 is as follows: "View of Delhi, the capital, the gardens, the whole country, the palace and the Kutab with the portrait of Nur Jehan Begam, daughter of Mirza Ghayas-uddin, the Persian, the beloved of the Emperor Jahangir, together with the portrait of Sikander Bano Mumtaz Begam, Taj Mahal Shah Jehan; couplet
By order of the Emperor Jehangir obtained a hundred jewels
Became light of the world (Nur Jahan) by the grace of God
Gold by the name of Nur Jehan Badshah Begam
the companion of life, and the sharer
of the secrets of Jehangir Shah"

Many retrospective portraits of the wives of earlier Mughal emperors were painted during the eighteenth century, and Nur Jahan was one of the most frequently depicted. The inscription notes certain details of the distant landscape and townscape, and close examination of the painting shows these to be accurate, the Qutb Minar (spelt 'Kutab' in the inscription) clearly standing out on the green horizon at centre left.

For discussions of Nidha Mal's style and career and examples of his works see (in addition to those cited above) see Falk and Archer 1981, no.190, pp.121-2; Rosenfield and Beach 1966, no.220; Leach 1995, vol. 2, no.6.322; Hurel 2010, p.10; Sotheby's London, 11 April 1988, lot 18.