

PARADISE PORTRAYED

The Notion of Paradise in Visual Traditions and Cultures

by Fatima Saeed

Abstract

Paradise Portrayed explores the concept of Paradise across visual traditions and cultures, treating it as an enduring and ongoing human pursuit. It considers how Paradise has been depicted through religion, mythology, and secular thought alike. The most recurring visual image of Paradise is a symmetrical, walled garden centred on water—most famously articulated as the *chahar bagh* of Persian and Mughal traditions. The paper connects this image to poetry, music, textiles, and even the contemporary digital world, and considers why the idea has persisted for so long and continues to resonate today.

Keywords: *Paradise, Persian gardens, Mughal gardens, chahar bagh.*

Introduction

This paper explores the image of Paradise from both religious and secular perspectives, and examines how the concept has been expressed across different cultures and traditions. It analyses the physical representation of Paradise, focusing in particular on the recurring significance of the garden, and situates the *chahar bagh* theme within the wider geometric vocabulary of art and architecture produced under Muslim rule, highlighting the role of symmetry and order in symbolising this ideal. The paper further considers how the idea of Paradise resurfaces in conceptions of utopia and in contemporary visual culture, understanding Paradise, at its core, as an expression of the human imagination of an ideal state and the ongoing pursuit of that ideal.

The Importance of Paradise

To believe in paradise is easy, but imagining it is not. Poets and prophets have had to show us the way. Buddha proffered enlightenment, an existence without suffering. The Vikings dreamed up Valhalla, a hall of dead heroes battling by day and feasting by night for eternity. Dante famously described a heaven ruled by reason, while the writer Jorge Luis Borges confided, “I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library.”

The list goes on, with each paradise based on different conceptions of God, reality, salvation, and delight. How to disentangle a concept that is so personal and, at the same time, so universal? Paradise can be an ideal, a state of being, a discovery. Perhaps the closest we can ever get to

*touching paradise is to reach for it. Something deeply ingrained in mankind drives us to that quest. To say anything more would be a stretch; anything less, inhuman.*¹

The idea of Paradise can be understood as a continuous human search for a perfect state, a notion reflected in religious teaching, mythology, and secular thought alike. Rather than a chronological survey, this paper treats Paradise as a concept bound up with human struggle, in which the individual seeks perfection. Human beings tend to remain dissatisfied with what they already possess, yearning instead for something lost or hoping to attain something not yet had. In many traditions, reaching this ideal state is tied to a code of conduct: following that code in this life promises reward in the next, while failing to do so invites punishment—a structure found across both monotheistic and polytheistic religions. The following section examines how different religious texts, mythologies, and cultures portray the concept of Paradise.

Paradise Portrayed Through the Visual

This section explores how Paradise has been represented through different visual forms, shaped by both religious and secular texts and ideas, and varying widely across cultures and traditions.

The word *paradise* descends from the Old Persian *pairi daeza*, properly written as two words: *pairi*, meaning periphery or perimeter—a boundary—and *daeza* (related to *daes*), meaning place, nation, or country. Together, the term describes a place whose periphery is enclosed and controlled: a walled enclosure or garden. Its association with pleasure and sensory delight is a comparatively later, European inflection of the word, applied once the term entered European languages to describe gardens created for the pleasure of the senses—sight, scent, and sound. From Old Persian, the term passed into Hebrew (as *pardes*), Aramaic, and ancient Greek (as *parádeisos*), retaining a closely related meaning in each. It appears three times in the Hebrew Scriptures and recurs in later rabbinic literature. The translators of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, rendered *gan*, the Hebrew word for ‘garden,’ as *paradeisos*, and in Christian texts *paradeisos* came to refer specifically to the Garden of Eden.²

¹Sho Speath, “The Quest of Paradise,” *Time Magazine: Asian Journey, in Search of Paradise* (New York: Time Inc., July 26–August 2, 2004), 29–30.

²Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, MI: Thomas Gale, 2005), 6981.



Fig. 1. Siddhartha's meditation under the Bodhi Tree in Sukhavati (Pure Land).



Fig. 2. Hieronymus Bosch, The Garden of Earthly Delights, 1480–1505. Oil on panel, 220 × 390 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain.

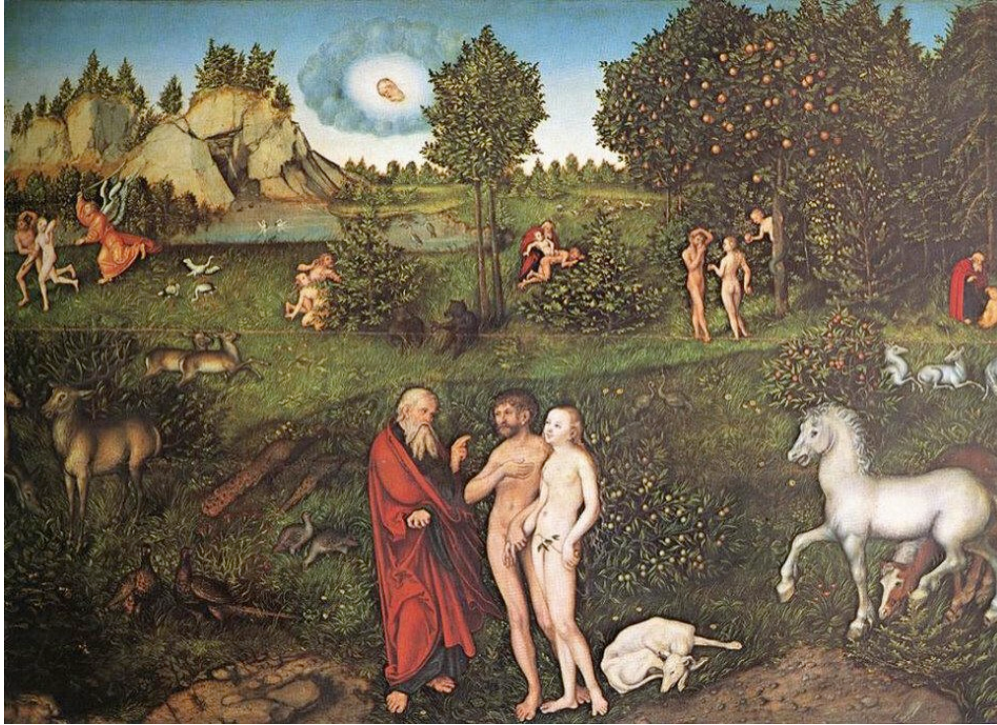


Fig. 3. Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Garden of Eden*, 1530. Oil on wood, 81 × 114 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria.

Paradise Depicted as a Garden

And the Lord God planted a garden in the east, in Eden... The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters.³

This description from the Book of Genesis presents heaven, or Paradise, as a garden: filled with trees for both visual enjoyment and sustenance, and watered by a river that runs through it, planted by God himself. As a planned and orderly space, the garden symbolizes nature in all its beauty alongside the human desire to order and cultivate it. As Alister E. McGrath observes in *A Brief History of Heaven*, the walled garden—enclosing a carefully cultivated area of beautiful plants and animals—was “the most powerful symbol of paradise available to the human imagination,” blending the beauty of nature with the orderliness of human creation.

³The Bible, Genesis 2:8–10, English Standard Version. The location of Eden has long been associated by scholars with ancient Mesopotamia, in the region of Ur or Uruk—the same area traditionally linked to the birth of Abraham, and the region in which Cyrus the Great is said to have coined the Old Persian term *pairi daeza*. Later Christian commentary conflated the two, describing the gardens of Mesopotamia as the Garden of Eden and applying to them the Greek term *paradeisos*.

This walled-garden imagery, shared by Jewish and Christian tradition, symbolises a state of purity, innocence, and abundance—of fruit, flowers, colour, fragrance, shade, and coolness—that was subsequently lost, often imagined as having been depleted by war and hardship. Related conceptions of a fertile ‘pure land,’ with a mild and pleasant climate, appear in Buddhist scripture and Greek mythology as well. A comparable notion of the pleasure garden also appears in ancient Egyptian culture, where it was depicted in tombs as one of the pleasures awaiting the deceased in the afterlife.⁴

Continuing this shared framework, Islam envisions Paradise—*al-Firdaws* or *Jannah* in Arabic (called *Bihisht* in Persian, as in the phrase *hasht bihisht*, the ‘eight paradises’)—as a garden as well: a place filled with greenery, water, and fruit, offered in abundance as a reward for God-fearing believers. In Surah al-Tawbah (9:72), the Qur’an promises believers ‘gardens under which rivers flow’ and ‘beautiful mansions in gardens of Eden.’ Surah al-Baqarah (2:25) again describes ‘gardens beneath which rivers flow,’ in which the faithful are provided with fruit and pure companionship, abiding therein eternally. Surah Muhammad (47:15) describes four rivers of Paradise. The Qur’anic term for the fourth river is often translated into English simply as ‘wine,’ but this obscures a more layered etymology: the Arabic *sharab* denotes a drink or juice more broadly—the same root that gives Urdu its *mashroob* (beverage) and *sharbat* (a sweetened drink). The four rivers are more properly understood as milk, honey, pure water, and the juice or nectar of fruit, rather than wine in the fermented sense the English translation implies.

This image of Paradise as a garden recurs throughout the visual history of the Islamic world, most famously in Persian and Mughal gardens designed with reference to these Qur’anic descriptions. Cultivated for exceptional beauty, with lush foliage set against a close relationship between greenery and water, these gardens typically center on a pool with a fountain, from which four water channels extend at right angles—a layout known as *chahar bagh*, or ‘four gardens,’ evoking the Qur’anic four rivers. The form’s fourfold, symmetrical geometry is often credited to Safavid Persia and Mughal India, but its roots run considerably deeper: the earliest proper *chahar bagh* plans are generally attributed to the Sassanian Empire, under rulers such as Shapur and Khosrow II, and the form was later revived and carried westward by Timur and his Timurid successors well before its

⁴ Denise Schmandt-Besserat, “The Garden of Ancient Egypt,” *Immortal Egypt* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1978), 47.

refinement by later Persian and Mughal dynasties. Across this long history, the garden's symmetrical design served to imitate order in nature and society alike, binding religious value to political ambition.⁵



Fig. 4. Mosaic panels at the Great Umayyad Mosque of Damascus, 8th century, Syria.

⁵D. Fairchild Ruggles, *Islamic Gardens and Landscapes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). Ruggles traces the origins of the fourfold chahar bagh plan to the Sassanian Empire under rulers such as Shapur and Khosrow II, and documents its later revival and diffusion under Timur and his Timurid successors, well before its refinement in Safavid Persia and Mughal India.



Fig. 5. Detail of the mural at the Great Umayyad Mosque of Damascus, 8th century, Syria.

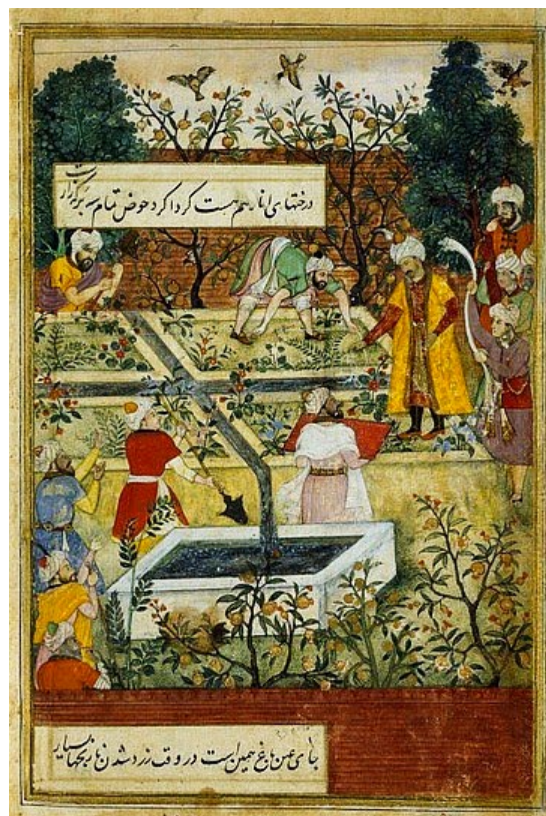


Fig. 6. Bishndas (painter) and Nanha (portraits), Babur Supervising the Laying Out of the Garden of Fidelity, Mughal miniature painting from the Baburnama, c. 1590. Opaque watercolor on paper, 21.7 × 14.3 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England.



Fig. 7. Chahar Bagh at Humayun's Tomb, Delhi, built by his widow Bega Begum (Hajji Begum), 1569–70. Architect: Mirak Mirza Ghiyath, India.

*Geometry enlightens the intellect and sets one's mind right. All its proofs are very clear and orderly. It is hardly possible for errors to enter into geometric reasoning, because it is well arranged and orderly. Thus the mind that constantly applies itself to geometry is unlikely to fall into error...*⁶

Geometry occupies an enduring place within the art of the Islamic era, employing basic forms—squares and circles—combined into increasingly complex patterns that remain among its most recognizable features. This tradition explored geometric relationships with particular intensity and sophistication, though it was by no means alone in doing so: Egyptian, Sassanian, Buddhist, and Chinese art each developed rich and, in some respects, equally advanced geometric traditions of their own, and any comparative claim of primacy would need to rest on more detailed evidence than can be offered here.

⁶Abd al-Rahman bin Muhammad Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah* (1377), trans. Franz Rosenthal, ed. N. J. Dawood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 14.



Fig. 8. *Isfahan Chahar Bagh, Paradise Garden carpet, 17th century. 220 × 390 cm, Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain.*

Within Islamic history, the Paradise garden has been a recurring source of inspiration for literature and for the mystical poetry of Muslim poets and scholars, as well as for Persian carpets and Mughal miniature painting—terms that, while imperfect (carpets and paintings being no more ‘Persian’ or ‘Mughal’ in an essential sense than any other regional art form), have become established as genres in their own right. Each of these forms draws on the symbolic meaning of the garden: its design, the detail of its watercourses, and the specific vegetation—the particular plants and trees—that populate it. The garden setting recurs, too, as a backdrop in miniature painting and in the episodes of poems and stories.



Fig. 9. The Mughal Emperor Babur's Bagh-i-Vafa (Garden of Fidelity) at Kabul, illustrated in a chronicle of Babur's life, late 16th century.



Fig. 10. Patio of the Myrtles, with the Comares Tower and its arcades reflected in the water, 14th century. Alhambra's Chahar Bagh, Granada, Spain.

The Concept of Paradise in the Contemporary World

Kevin Rushby describes the idea of Paradise as ‘the idea that rules the world,’ reflected across visual art in every form—from murals to architecture, from paintings to goblets—and originating from every part of the globe. Most such forms draw on religious scripture, though the concept of Paradise as a spiritual idea has also been explored within iconoclastic traditions that oppose established faiths, often through mathematical ratio and aesthetic harmony. Sacred geometry, or the Golden Mean, reflects a long history of philosophers and mathematicians drawing connections between nature, art, architecture, and music through geometric proportion.⁷

⁷Fatima Saeed and Michael Kempson, “Paradise Suite: In Search of an Embodiment of a Heavenly Abode” (MFA thesis, College of Fine Arts, UNSW, 2018).

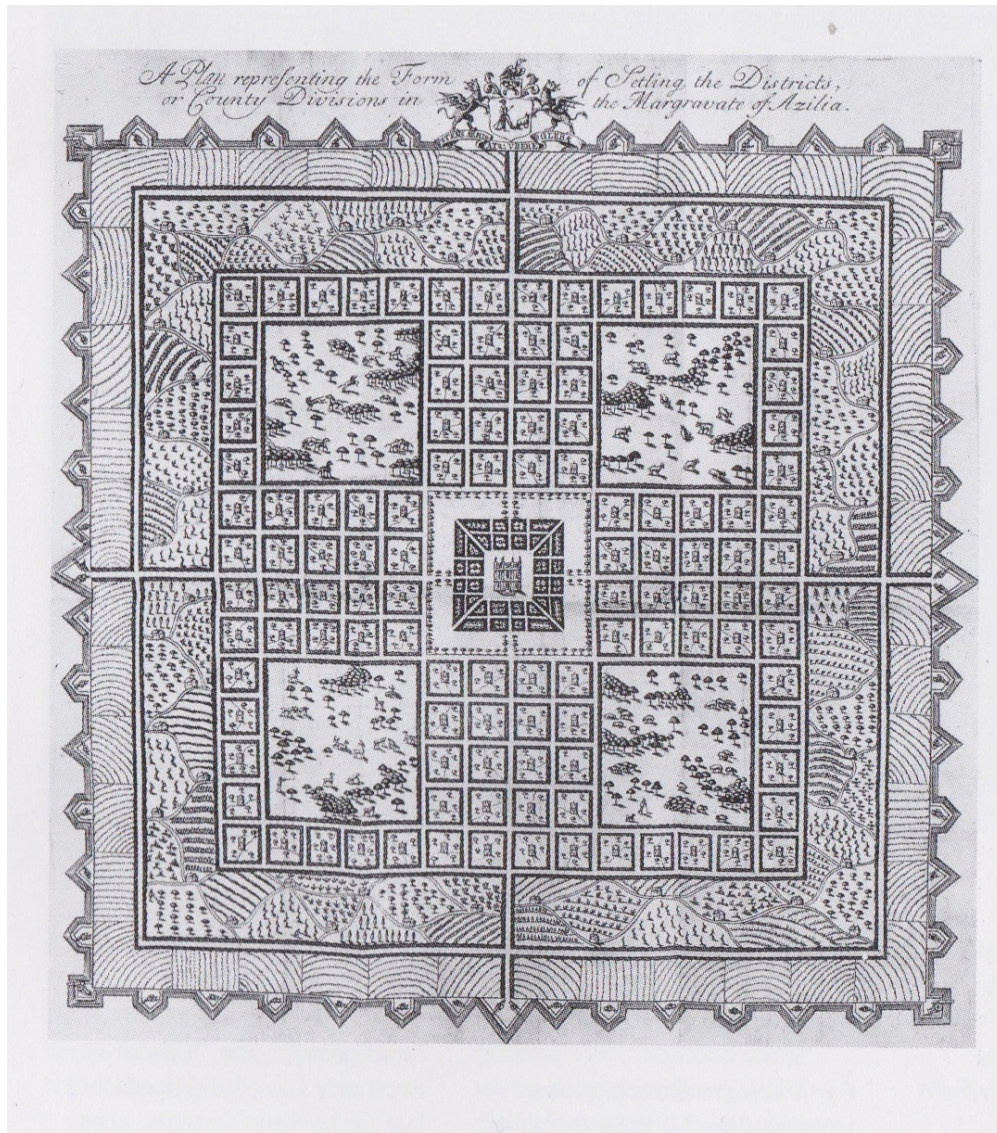


Fig. 11. Attrib. Albrecht Dürer, *Etliche Unterricht, zu Befestigung der Stett, Schloss und Flecken*, 1527. Collection of NYPL, Spencer Collection, Nuremberg.

Many parallels to this same ideal persist in today's world: gated residential communities, artificial islands, internet games, and manicured gardens all reflect a continuing search for, or recreation of, that perfect place on Earth. The skyscrapers of Dubai rise from the middle of a desert; Bahria Town, a well-known residential development in Lahore whose name literally means 'a town made of water,' promises an ideal life within secure, paradise-like walls; and a local Lahori neighbourhood named 'Eden Villas' offers shared gardens and ornamental waterfalls. Each of these developments gestures toward the same idyllic landscape that humanity continues to yearn for.

A related substitute for Heaven or Paradise has emerged in cyberspace, often understood as a technological space into which we can upload a disembodied self in any desired configuration. Utopian thought draws on a similar wellspring, as in Albrecht Dürer's etching of cities arranged in strict geometric order, premised on the idea that rational geometry might reflect a rational universe. The idea of Paradise resurfaces, too, in poetry and popular song: the American rock band Guns N' Roses describe Paradise as a place 'where the grass is green and the girls are pretty,' while Joni Mitchell, in 'Big Yellow Taxi,' laments its loss as a parking lot is built over it.

Conclusion

This research has traced how Paradise has been portrayed across cultures and how images of the garden recur throughout myth and cultural memory. Given my own background and interest in Islamic art and architecture, I have concentrated in particular on the chahar bagh garden layout of Persian and Mughal tradition, attending closely to its symmetry, its water elements, and the geometric order that structures it.

Paradise, as portrayed in Hany Abu-Assad's film *Paradise Now*, endures as something like a hybrid model—a shared dream held in common across cultural, religious, and political boundaries. Across the traditions surveyed here, the concept has outgrown any single definition as a physical place or a psychological state.

What emerges instead is an idea old enough to have become almost inseparable from the human condition: encoded less in any one scripture or garden than in the recurring, cross-cultural instinct to imagine order, abundance, and water where there is none—to build, generation after generation, a walled and watered answer to our own impermanence.

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