THE EMPEROR JAHANGIR, CONNOISSEUR OF PAINTINGS

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Mughal painting in India was closely associated with the personal tastes and art appreciation of the three great rulers of India, Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan. Akbar's great achievement was the creation of a distinctive school of painting. During his reign he established an academy in which about a hundred Hindu artists worked under the guidance of Persian painters. Gradually these painters developed a style of their own which combines Persian, Hindu, and European elements. Many painters at the court of Akbar, such as Lal and Basawan, used soft and subdued colors instead of the bright Persian ones. European influence was introduced into India in 1580 by a Jesuit mission which brought with them an illustrated Bible and pictures with Christian subjects. From such European paintings the Mughal artists borrowed shading and aerial perspective.

The Emperor Jahangir inherited from his father a great love for painting. Like Akbar he collected illuminated Persian manuscripts and albums of paintings, special agents being sent to Persia and other countries to acquire manuscripts and works of art. He also collected European paintings. Of his contact with Western art we have an interesting account in the letters of the English ambassador, Sir Thomas Roe, who spent four years (1615-1619) at the Mughal court. Of his knowledge of paintings Jahangir writes in his Memoirs as follows:

"As regards myself, my liking for painting and my practice in judging it have arrived at such a point that when any work is brought to me, either of deceased artists or those of the present day without the names being told me, I say on the spur of the moment that it is the work of such and such man. And if there be a picture containing many portraits, and each face be the work of a different master, I can discover which face is the work of each of them. If any other person has put in the eye and eyebrow of a face, I can perceive whose work the original face is, and who has painted the eye and eyebrow."

Painting, under Jahangir, was a courtly and aristocratic art in which portraiture predominated. There are many portraits of the Emperor Jahangir, either alone or with his courtiers, showing fine likenesses of him. Several of them are in this Museum, one of the finest being a painting in an album (reproduced on the opposite page), in which the glorification of the emperor is enhanced by a golden halo. On his travels to Kashmir and other parts of the country, Jahangir was always accompanied by two or three of his artists, who recorded interesting incidents. In these miniature paintings, often depicting hunting scenes, Jahangir himself is usually represented (see p. 198).

Portraits of Jahangir's sons, the princes Sultan Parviz and Khurram, are also frequent. In some of the paintings the more leisurely life of the court is represented. One of them in the Museum's album represents Prince Sultan Parviz surrounded by musicians (p. 198); in another we see the ladies of Jahangir's court enjoying themselves on a garden terrace (p. 199).

Jahangir's interest in European paintings, chiefly those with Christian subjects, is referred to in the letters of Sir Thomas Roe. In a letter to the East India Company, dated November 27, 1615, Sir Thomas tells us that the pictures Jahangir received from England were not worth a penny: "Here are nothing esteemed but of the best sorts: good Cloth and fine, and rich Pictures, they comming out of Italy overland and from Ormus; soe that they laugh at vs for such as wee bring. And doubtlesse they understand them as well as wee."

Sir Thomas Roe and Jahangir had many in-
A portrait of the Emperor Jahangir (1605-1627) in an album of Mughal miniature paintings of the XVII and XVIII centuries
LEFT: The young Emperor Jahangir on a hunting trip. RIGHT: Prince Sultan Faruz, son of Jahangir, with his courtiers and musicians. Mughal, early XVII century.
LEFT: Ladies of Jahangir's court on a garden terrace. RIGHT: Diana, a copy of a European painting.
Mughal, early XVII century
teresting conversations far into the night on painting and on art in general. The emperor was impressed by English and French miniatures but was sure that Indian artists could do just as fine work. To convince the ambassador of the skill of his court painters, he ordered five copies of a European miniature.

“At night hee sent for mee, beeing hastie to triumph in his woorkman, and shewed me 6 Pictures, 5 made by his man, all pasted on one table, so like that I was by candle-light troubled to discerne which was which; I confesse beyond all expectation, yet I shewed myne owne and the differences, which were in arte apparent, but not to be judged by a Common eye. But for that at first sight I knew it not, hee was very merry and Joyful and craked like a Northern man. I gaue him way and Content, praysing his mans arte. Now, saith hee, what say you? I replied I saw his Maiestie needed noe Picture from our Country.”

Like his father, Jahangir was not only fond of religious pictures but also of those with mythological subjects. According to Roe, among the new paintings that arrived from England in 1617 there were portraits of Lady Montagu and Lady Molyneux and a picture representing Venus and a Satyr. The subject of this last picture fascinated the emperor, who asked its meaning. He was not satisfied with the ambassador’s explanation that the subject was poetical and had his own interpretation of the picture: “I suppose he understood the Morall to be a scorne of Asiatiques, whom the naked Satyre represented, and was of the same complexion, and not vnlike; who, being held by Venus, a white woman, by the Nose, it seemed that shee led him Captiue.”

The East India Company sent many allegorical pictures to Jahangir. Among those which particularly pleased him was one representing Diana. Some of these European pictures, both religious and profane, were copied by Mughal court artists. Among such miniature copies in our album is a representation of Diana (p. 199), as well as pictures of the Seasons and of European ladies of the time.

The album from which the illustrations in this article are taken is at present being shown in the exhibition India’s Gods and Kings in the Junior Museum. This exhibition also includes portraits of Akbar and Shah Jahan, miniatures showing Mughal court life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Indian sculpture, armor, textiles, musical instruments, and jewelry, and photographs of Indian architecture.