MUGHAL PAINTING UNDER AKBAR THE GREAT

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The conquest of Hindustan in 1526 by Babur, a descendent in the fifth generation from Timur, or Tamerlane, brought Persian art and culture to India. Babur (1526-1530), the founder of the Mogul, or Mughal, dynasty, was known as a learned philosopher and a wide traveler and lover of nature. Like his ancestors, the Timurid princes, he showed great interest in the art of painting and had a large collection of illuminated Persian manuscripts, illustrated by famous painters of the Herat school, among them Bihzad and his pupils.

Babur's son and successor, Humayun (1530-1556), was forced in 1540 by an Afghan revolt to seek refuge first in Sind and then in Persia. While in Persia he was the guest of Shah Tahmasp in Tabriz, where he became acquainted with the work of some of the greatest Persian painters of the sixteenth century. At the court of Shah Tahmasp, Humayun met two young artists, Mir Sayyid Ali of Tabriz and Abdus Samad of Shiraz, and invited them to join his court at Kabul. These two Persian artists may be regarded as the actual founders of the Mughal school of painting. Mir Sayyid Ali was engaged to illustrate the Persian romance of Amir Hamza (Dastan i-Amir Hamza), an account of the adventures of the hero Hamza, an uncle of Muhammad. The manuscript, although begun under Humayun, was actually completed in the time of his successor, the emperor Akbar (1556-1605). Akbar was very fond of the three hundred tales of this romance, which he often used to recite in the female apartments. The work consisted originally of twelve large volumes with fourteen hundred illustrations (five of the paintings are in this Museum). Fifty painters were engaged, at first under Mir Sayyid Ali, later under Abdus Samad.

Akbar the Great was an extraordinary ruler, who not only consolidated the political power of his empire but also greatly influenced the artistic and cultural life of India. He was tolerant of other races and religions. All persecution of the Hindu religion was forbidden, and the tax on unbelievers, that is, non-Muslims, was abolished. The native Rajputs were employed by Akbar in the administration and the army. He favored marriages between Mughals and Hindu women, and two of his own wives were Rajput princesses.

Akbar was very much interested in various manifestations of the human mind, particularly in the religions of the Hindus, Parsees, and Christians, hoping to find the “ultimate truth.” In a special building, called the House of Worship, he organized discussions on religion and philosophy. In 1582 he proclaimed a new religious system, the Din Ilahi, or “Divine Faith.” The rites of this eclectic cult were based to a great extent on the Zoroastrian creed of the Parsees. But the new “religion” of Akbar never spread beyond the limits of the Mughal court.

In 1578 Akbar requested the Portuguese authorities of Goa to send him Christian missionaries and with them holy books, especially the Gospels, which he desired to understand and from which he hoped to gain comfort. A party of Jesuits consisting of Father Rodolpho Aquaviva and Father Antonio Monserrate arrived in Fathpur Sikri in March 1580 and presented Akbar with a copy of Plantin's Bible (printed 1569-1573), with engravings by Flemish artists, and two beautiful paintings representing Christ and the Virgin Mary. Akbar had several of these copied by his own painters.

At the request of the emperor two other
Amir Hamza's friend 'Amr pursuing a spy outside the castle where Hamza has been imprisoned by his enemies. From a manuscript of the Persian romance "Dastan-i-Amir Hamza," about 1556-1575. This miniature may be the work of the Persian painter Abdus Samad, one of the founders of the Mughal school in India at the time of Akbar the Great. The palm tree is probably the Indian betel palm. Painted on cotton cloth. Height 28½ inches. Rogers Fund, 1923
Jesuit missions, one in 1590, the other in 1595, arrived at the imperial court. These missions brought additional Christian books and engravings, mostly by Flemish artists of the Antwerp school, some of them copies of German works by Albrecht Dürer and others. The influence of Western art on Mughal painting is shown in two of the miniatures illustrated. The figures under the tree on page 49 are taken from a European painting, and the figure of the wounded man suggests a Christian martyr. In the illustration of one of the exploits of Alexander on page 50 the artist has added Westerners to the story, some of them Jesuit missionaries holding Bibles. Although the emperor showed the greatest interest in Christianity and even took part in the divine service of the Jesuits, he failed to become a convert.

The great monument of Akbar’s time is the city of Fathpur Sikri, which was begun in 1569 and finished fifteen years later. His palaces there were sumptuously decorated with mural paintings. In Fathpur Sikri Akbar established an atelier near his palace, containing workrooms for the arts of painting, gold-work, weaving, and the manufacture of arms. The historian Abu'l Fazl, the emperor’s friend and minister, gives us in his Ain-i-Akbari, or “Institutions of Akbar,” a vivid account of Akbar’s great interest in the art of painting. As a young man he had taken drawing lessons from the painter Abdus Samad, who had the title of Shirin-qalam, or “Sweet Pen.” “His Majesty, from his earliest youth, has shown a great predilection for this art, and gives it every encouragement, as he looks upon it as a means, both of study and amusement. Hence the art flourishes, and many painters have obtained great reputation. The works of all painters are weekly laid before His Majesty by the Daroghahs and the clerks; he then confers rewards according to excellence of workmanship, or increases the monthly salaries. Most excellent painters are now to be found, and masterpieces worthy of Bihzad, may be placed at the side of the wonderful works of the European painters who have attained world-wide fame. The minuteness of detail, the general finish, the boldness of execution, etc., now observed in pictures are incomparable; even inanimate objects look as if they had life.” Akbar’s opinion of painting was in contrast to that of the strict Muhammadans: “Bigoted followers of the letter of the law are hostile to the art of painting; but their eyes now see the truth. One day at a private party of friends, His Majesty, who had conferred on several the pleasure of drawing near him, remarked: ‘There are many that hate painting; but such men I dislike. It appears to me as if a painter had quite peculiar means of recognizing God; for a painter in sketching anything that has life, and in devising its limbs, one after the other, must come to feel that he cannot bestow individuality upon his work, and is thus forced to think of God, the Giver of life, and will thus increase in knowledge.’”

Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad continued to be chief painters at Akbar’s atelier, where more than a hundred painters of various nationalities were engaged to illustrate Persian manuscripts. Most of these painters were Hindus from Kashmir, Gujarat, and Punjab, who brought with them the traditions of local schools. The Hindu influence is already apparent in the earliest works of the Akbar school, such as the illustrations of the Romance of Amir Hamza. In the beginning Persian and Indian elements existed side by side. The Hindu artists introduced not only Indian landscapes but also a naturalistic style unknown in Persian art. Among the foremost Hindu artists were Daswanth, Basawan, and Lal. Daswanth was a pupil of Abdus Samad, and, according to the Ain-i-Akbari, in a short time he surpassed all painters and became the first master of the age. Basawan, whose work shows a strong individual style, is also highly praised by Abu’l Fazl: “In backgrounding, drawing of features, distribution of colors, portrait painting, and several other branches, he is most excellent, so much so, that many critics prefer him to Daswanth.” The following painters of Akbar’s school are represented in the Museum’s collection: Basawan, Bhim Gujarati, Khem Karam, Dharam Das, Mano-
The shah rendering justice to a widow whose son was killed by one of his retinue. From a manuscript of the “Khamsa” of Amir Khusrau Dihlavi, about 1595
Alexander being lowered into the sea in a glass jar to observe undersea life. From a poem about the exploits of Alexander the Great in Asia in the "Khamsa" of Dihlavi.
Besides the Persian classics Akbar was greatly interested in historical works dealing with the history of the Mongols, the house of Timur, and the Mughals. Copies of the Akbar-nama ("Book of Akbar"), written by Abu'l Fazl, were profusely illustrated for the emperor's own use. Many scholars were engaged in translations from the Sanskrit into Persian. Abu'l Fazl translated the Kalilah Dannah under the title of Iyar i-Danish. In 1582 Akbar gave the order to translate the Hindu epic Mahabharata, known as the Razmnama, or "Book of Wars," into Persian. Three miniatures from a manuscript of this work are in the Museum. Akbar's own copy is in the

Jaipur Library. In the illustrations of the Razmnama the Indian influence is very strong. Other works translated into Persian were the Ramayana and the love story of Nala and Damayanti.

Of great importance for the formation of the Mughal style of painting was Akbar's personal interest in European art. From European paintings the Hindu artists learned about perspective and modeling. They introduced the third dimension, which is apparent in the rendering of figures and landscapes. Some of the distant landscapes seen through atmospheric haze recall the paintings of Flemish masters and miniatures in the manuscripts of Books of Hours. The color schemes of Mughal paintings are often subdued, the outlines soft and fluid. The formation of the Mughal style, created by all the artists working for Akbar the Great, was a synthesis of Persian, Indian, and European elements.

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Detail of a miniature from the "Khamsa" of Dihlavi, which shows the fully developed naturalistic style of the Mughal school. This painting and those illustrated on pages 49 and 50, Gift of Alexander Smith Cochran, 1913