AN EXHIBITION OF ISLAMIC AND INDIAN PAINTINGS

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The exhibition assembled in gallery D 6 consists of material acquired recently from the Kevorkian Foundation and of outstanding loans from American museums and private collections. To present a more complete picture of Islamic and Indian painting important material from the Museum’s own collection has been included. The exhibition contains many well-known works of art, from the eleventh to the eighteenth century, which are for the first time brought together for the enjoyment of the public and of students interested in oriental art. The new acquisitions not only fill some of the gaps in the Museum’s collection but enrich it with numerous masterpieces of Islamic and Indian painting.

The beginnings of Islamic painting are based to a great extent on traditions of Persian art of the Sasanian era (226-637). Eighth- and ninth-century wall paintings unearthed in Syria and Mesopotamia continue these traditions but at the same time show the birth of a new Islamic style. This style was fully developed under the Turkish Seljuks, who conquered Persia and Mesopotamia in the eleventh century. At that time a local school existed in the South Caspian provinces of Gilan and Gurgan. The work of Persian miniaturists of the twelfth century is known to us from ceramic ware with polychrome decoration from Rayy and Kashan. The center of the thirteenth-century Mesopotamian school of painting was Baghdad, where three main sources, East Christian, Persian, and Seljuq, contributed to the formation of the Abbasid style.

The earliest miniatures in the exhibition, lent by the Cincinnati Art Museum, are also the oldest Persian ones known to exist. They are from a manuscript, dated 1090, of the Andarz-nama, or Book of Counsel, written by Unsur al-Maʿali Kayus, Prince of Gilan and Gurgan, for his son. Twelfth-century Seljuk miniature painting is represented by two magnificent bowls from the John Schiff collection depicting the story of Bahram Gur and Azada. To the Baghdad school belong several pages, from various lenders, of an Arabic manuscript of Dioscorides’s Materia Medica, copied and illustrated by Abd Allah ibn al-Fazl in 1223/24. An early Mongol miniature, one of the Museum’s new acquisitions, is from a manuscript of about 1300 of the Manafi’ al-Hayawan, or Description of Animals. It shows two serpents painted in the naturalistic style characteristic of Mongol art and similar to that of some of the miniatures in a manuscript of the Manafi’ lent by the Morgan Library (see p. 87). The illustrations of this manuscript, made for Ghazan Khan and completed in 1297 or 1299, show the impressionistic style of Chinese monochrome ink paintings of the Sung and Yüan dynasties side by side with the traditional style of the thirteenth-century Abbasid school of Mesopotamia.

Under the Mongol rulers numerous copies of the Shah-nama, or Book of Kings, were illustrated. This epic poem, composed in 1010 by Firdausi and based partly on history and partly on legend, remained a favorite source of Persian art for centuries. Several large paintings from
the Demotte Shah-nama, one of the earliest and most important Mongol copies, begun about 1320 at Tabriz, have been lent by the Boston Museum, the Cleveland Museum, the Detroit Institute, and Edward Forbes (see p. 88). These illustrations, masterpieces of Persian painting, show a mixture of Chinese and Persian styles.

Another group of manuscripts of the Mongol period, mostly Shah-namas, are of small size and represent the true miniature style of Persia. The finest of these on exhibition, richer in color than the others, are from a Shah-nama of about 1340 (see p. 85). Although Mongol influence is apparent, the Persian character is predominant. They are of outstanding quality and similar in style to paintings of the Demotte Shah-nama.

Also of early date are five miniatures from a manuscript of al-Jazari's Automata copied in 1315 (see p. 90). These belong to the Mamluk school of Islamic painting, hitherto not represented in the Museum's collection. Al-Jazari's treatise, dealing with mechanical inventions such as water clocks and water wheels, was completed in 1206. Several miniatures from a later manuscript of the Automata, made for an amir of the Mamluk sultan Salah ad-Din Salih (1351-1354), have been lent to the exhibition by the Boston Museum, the Fogg Art Museum, and Paul Sachs. These are painted in bright colors and a vigorous decorative style based on that of the Abbasid school.

Persian painting reached its height of development, becoming truly national, in the fifteenth century under the Timurid dynasty, established by Timur, or Tamerlane (1369-1404), a descendant of the Mongol Chingiz Khan. Timur's son, Shah Rukh, was a great patron of learning and art and had a famous library of illustrated books at Herat, his capital. His son, Baisankur Mirza, founded at Herat a library and academy where forty painters, calligraphers, illuminators, and binders were employed, under the direction of the well-known calligrapher Jafar al-Tabrizi. A number of paintings and several manuscripts owned by the Museum and others lent by the Walters Art Gallery belong to the Timurid school. The miniatures show highly decorative landscapes with high horizons and spongy mountains painted in vivid colors.

Two miniatures acquired from the Kevorkian Foundation represent the Shiraz branch of the Timurid school, in which artists working for the princes Ibrahim and Iskandar developed a style different from that of Herat. They are from a manuscript of the Zafar-nama, or History of Timur, dated 1436. The characteristic features are cooler and lighter color schemes and greater freedom of drawing, with less of the detail so typical of Herat painting.

In the second half of the century the Black Sheep and White Sheep Turkomans had begun to assert themselves in western Persia. Shiraz was conquered in 1452 and probably became the main center of the Turkoman school of painting, which is represented at its height in the exhibition by four rather large miniatures of a manuscript that may be identified as a Khazar(?)-nama (see p. 91). The treatment of landscapes and figures is broader and the colors brighter than those in the Timurid paintings of Shiraz.

One of the most celebrated of all Persian painters was Bihzad, active in the late fifteenth century at Herat. Known as the "Marvel of the Age," he was a keen observer of nature. His paintings are masterpieces of composition, full of action and realism, and the figures have a decided individuality of expression and gesture. He was famous for drawings of bearded faces. Two miniatures from the Museum's collection may be by Bihzad and are good examples of his style. The painting of dancing dervishes is particularly worthy of his brush.

To the school of Bihzad may be attributed a manuscript of the Zafar-nama that has been lent by the John Work Garrett Library of the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore. This important copy was made in 1467 by the calligrapher Shir Ali for Sultan Husain Mirza. It contains six double-page miniatures of a later date, with colors somewhat brighter than those used by Bihzad. However, they may be definitely assigned to his school of about 1490.

The rise of the Safavid dynasty in 1502 inaugurated a new era in Persian painting, characterized by elegance of style and technical refinement. Many artists were employed by Shah Tahmasp (1524-1576), a great patron of
the arts, who took lessons from his court painter Sultan Muhammad. The works of these painters are masterpieces of color, composition, and design. Not only were magnificent illustrated books produced but also single drawings and idealized portraits of men and women. Several of these have been acquired by the Museum. One, a portrait of a lady, is signed by Ustad Muhammad, whose works show a preference for tall slender figures in an individual style (see p. 92). The paintings by Aka Riza of young men with large turbans, one of which is signed, reveal the sophistication typical of the Safavid school (see p. 93).

The last famous Safavid painter was Riza-i-Abbasi, who left a large number of signed works dating from 1598 to 1643. His realistic genre and love scenes show a close observation of nature, and his paintings and drawings of young men are true portraits of people seen every day on the streets or at the court of Isfahan (see p. 93). His manner is frequently calligraphic.

The Museum's most notable new acquisitions are in the field of Indian painting. Among the early ones are several leaves from eleventh-century Buddhist palm manuscripts of the Bengal school, other palm manuscripts of the twelfth-century Nepalese school, and thirty-one paintings from a fifteenth-century manuscript of Kalpa Sutra of the Gujarati school, one of the sources of the Rajput style of Indian painting. Also shown in the exhibition for the first time
are outstanding examples of Mughal painting of the periods of Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan. The most important of these are in an album assembled for Shah Jahan (1628-1658), purchased in part with funds donated by the Kevorkian Foundation.

The Mughal emperors, like their Persian ancestors, were devoted patrons of art and learning. Babur (1526-1530), a descendant of Timur, who as a conqueror brought Muhammadan civilization to India, had a large collection of Persian miniatures. In 1540 his son, Humayun, forced by an Afghan revolt to seek refuge at the court of Shah Tamasp, became acquainted with the work of the Persian painters there, two of whom, Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad, he invited to join his court. They may be regarded as the actual founders of the Mughal school.

Akbar (1556-1605), an extraordinary personality, not only consolidated the political power of the Mughal empire but also influenced the artistic and cultural life of India. An admirer of European pictures brought to India by Jesuits, he had many of them copied by Hindu painters. In his workrooms for the arts of the book at Fathpur-Sikri more than a hundred painters were engaged in illustrating Persian and other manuscripts, most of them Hindus from Kashmir, Gujarat, and the Punjab. Several of Akbar’s foremost painters are represented in the exhibition by outstanding works showing an interesting mixture of Persian, Hindu, and European elements. Under the influence of European art, the Mughal painters introduced perspective and modeling. Some of the landscapes seem to be copied from Flemish miniature paintings.

Historical works were also produced at Akbar’s court, for instance the Akbar-nama, or History of Akbar, in richly illustrated copies, and translations from Sanskrit into Persian, including the Hindu epic the Mahabharata, called in Persian the Razm-nama, or Book of Wars. Among the recent acquisitions are five pages from a Razm-nama, with signatures of Fazl,
Makal, and Kasim, whose styles show a strong Rajput influence, particularly in color scheme and in the landscapes (see p. 94).

Shah Jahan’s album represents the height of Mughal court art and includes the work of some of the greatest painters, illuminators, and calligraphers—Aka Riza, Abu’l Hasan, Mansur, Murad, Manohar, Balchand, Govardhan, Nanhha, Bichitr, L’alchand, Hashim, Bishandas, Padarath, Fath Muhammad, Chitarman, and Muhammad Alam. Shah Jahan’s name appears on a magnificent illuminated page, in the center of an elaborate rosette surrounded by flying birds in a landscape, and the name of his successor, Aurangzib, in a rosette on another page. This “ex libris” indicates that the album was regarded as one of the royal treasures. It contained forty-nine miniature paintings, nine of which were acquired by the Freer Gallery in Washington. Of the forty now in the Metropolitan Museum twenty-six are portraits of Mughal rulers, princes, court officials, and shaikhs, five are genre scenes, nine are paintings of birds and animals. Not all the paintings were made in the time of Shah Jahan. Many of them were done in the reign of his father, Jahangir.

Jahangir (1605-1628) continued Akbar’s interest in art. He collected Persian manuscripts and European paintings, regarding himself as quite a connoisseur. His tastes, however, inclined more to paintings of events in his life and portraits than to illustrations of Persian and Indian classics. Jahangir was particularly enthusiastic about the painter Abu’l Hasan, the son of Aka Riza of Herat. Aka Riza, who painted one of the pictures in the album, continued the traditional Persian style, practiced also by other court painters, one of whom painted the album picture of dancing dervishes. Of Bishandas Jahangir also had a high opinion, regarding him as unequaled in his age for taking likenesses.

On his travels Jahangir always had two or three painters with him to record events of importance. Being a lover of nature, he ordered such artists as Mansur and Murad to paint beautiful specimens of the birds, animals, and flowers of Kashmir, where he had spent many happy days. Seven splendid pictures of animals and birds (see p. 100) in Shah Jahan’s album are by Mansur, who may be regarded as the Audubon of India. This great artist was also an excellent portrait painter (p. 98).

Mughal portraiture reached its height under Shah Jahan, who, like his predecessors, was a collector of paintings and a patron of the arts. Single portraits of the emperor and his nobles, as well as official ceremonies and embassies, reflect the luxurious court life of the time. The shah is shown on horseback, seated on the Peacock Throne, or standing on a terrace. Brilliant, jewel-like colors add to his splendor, and in some of the paintings angels and cherubs, derived from the West, hold various attributes of his glorification.

Technically the Mughal portraits painted by the court artists of Jahangir and Shah Jahan are among the greatest examples of miniature painting in existence. They were done with extreme care, love of detail, and fineness of drawing and modeling. They are likenesses in the European sense, in quality comparable to those of Holbein. In the seventeenth century many of them were collected and admired in Europe; Rembrandt made drawings of some of them. One of the finest examples of this great art in the album is the likeness of Shaikh Hasan Chishti by Bichitr (p. 99). Such a masterpiece of portraiture can only be fully appreciated under the magnifying glass.

Contemporary with the Mughal schools of painting were several Hindu schools, which flourished in northern India, in Rajputana, and in the Punjab hills. Their work, generally classified as Rajput, is subdivided into Rajasthani and Pahari, which are further subdivided into several local schools, such as Kangra, Basohli, and Garwhal. Rajput paintings differ in style and subject matter from those of the Mughal schools. Examples from the Museum’s collection and others lent by the Boston and Cleveland Museums and George B. Bickford are on exhibition. The most popular subjects were illustrations of ragas and raginis, or musical modes. The story of Krishna and his consort Radha (see p. 102) was also a great favorite of the Rajput painters. The color scheme of Rajput paintings is usually quite vivid, with yellow, reds, blues, and greens predominating.
Illustrations of mechanical inventions from the Automata, written by al-Jazari in 1206. Arabic, Mamluk school, from a copy dated 1315. When wine is poured into the cup at the left the bird turns and whistles. The water clock at the right has peacocks that also whistle and turn. Rogers Fund, 1955
Miniature painting from a manuscript of the Khavar(?)-nama, or Book of Prophets, showing a dragon guarding a lady imprisoned in a tent. Persian, Turkoman school, about 1480. Rogers Fund, 1955
Examples of single Persian miniature paintings of the Safavid school. Left, a lady painting her feet, second half of the XVI century. Center, portrait of a lady by Ustad Muhammadi, about 1575. Right, a young man seated beneath a flowering tree, second half of the XVI century. Rogers Fund, 1955
Yudhishtira and Arjuna embracing, from a manuscript of the Razm-nama, a translation of the Indian epic the Mahabharata. Mughal, school of Akbar, about 1590. Rogers Fund, 1955
Kwaja Jahan, one of Jahangir’s courtiers, a youth who has fallen from a tree, and the father of the youth. By Aka Riza. Mughal, school of Jahangir (1605–1628). From Shah Jahan’s album (see note inside cover)
Jahangir receiving a report from his vizier, Itimad ad-Daula, who was the father of the emperor's favorite wife. By Manohar. Mughal, school of Jahangir. From Shah Jahan's album.
Sar Rai Chanda, Rup Singh, one of the officials at the emperor's court. Portrait by Govardhan. Mughal, school of Shah Jahan (1628-1658). From Shah Jahan's album
Hajji Husain, a learned man of Bukhara, by Ustad Mansur. One of the bird paintings illustrated on page 100 is also by Mansur. Mughal, school of Jahangir. From Shah Jahan's album
“His Esteemed Excellency Shaikh Hasan Chishti, servant of Jahangir,” by Bichitr. It is one of the finest portraits in the album. Mughal, school of Jahangir, painted about 1620. From Shah Jahan’s album
Miniature paintings showing a man with a bear by Govardhan and a man with a lion by Padarath. Mughal, school of Jahangir. From Shah Jahan's album.
Krishna in a garden awaiting his consort, Radha, who approaches with maidens, miniature from a manuscript of Krishna Lila. Indian, Rajput school, early xvii century. Lent by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts