

# Consolidation of the Distinct Elements in Hamza Nama Illustrations

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## Abstract

After Humayun his son, Akbar became emperor. He inherited the workshop and the two master painters his father invited from Persia, Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad. This was the beginning of the Pre Mughal style of Painting. Akbar was keen for the collection of literature and he possibly ordered the illustration of all the manuscripts. In the initial years, the largest and the most extraordinary of all the Mughal Manuscripts illustrated, is the Hamza Nama or the Dastan –I – Amir Hamza began. It was the pictorial document describing the semi fictional adventures of Amir Hamza an Uncle of the Prophet Muhammad. It consisted of 1400 paintings in 12 volumes. The illustrations are of great significance as they show the sophistication of Safavid style with the Indian expression of painting.

## Key words

Abdus Samad and Mir Sayyed Ali, Hamza Nama Illustration, Imperial atelier of Akbar, Manuscript Illustration Under Akbar, Mughal style of Painting, Pre Mughal Painting, Safavid or Persian Influences on Mughal Painting.

## Introduction

After his defeat, Humayun was compelled to leave India, and he had to take refuge in the court of the Persian Ruler Shah Tahmasp Safavi, who was compassionate for him. Here he became familiarized to the greatest artistic and cultural tradition of Persia. Because of his great interest he invited artists from Persian court. Humayun surely can be credited for building encouraging conditions for Mughal Painting (Chatterjee, Ratnabali). Afterwards when his son Akbar became Emperor, the manuscript painting culminated significantly. He was keen to get illustrated all the manuscripts. He also ordered to create an album of 'Likeness' of all the courtiers and dignitaries. He was the great patron of arts and thus the Mughal Style was shaped in his Imperial atelier. The outstanding work of Hamza Nama was the first project commissioned by Emperor and it took fifteen years for completion. Its spontaneous, emotional, and tumultuous aspect, broad handling and strident colour are shockingly different from the paintings painted earlier either in India or in Persia (Chatterjee, Ratnabali). It is significant for its novel treatment of the theme and rendering. Subtle colours, their refined execution and ceremonial treatment characterize the Persian artworks. The dynamic movement expressed in Hamza Nama is very much different from the stylized manifestation of the Indigenous Indian manner.

## Illustration of Hamza Nama under Akbar

The story of Hamza Nama was originally from Persian literature and was widely spread before in Sultanate kingdoms before Mughals. Many manuscripts were illustrated on this subject. However, the Hamza Nama series executed for Akbar is obviously of much grander scale and have superior conception than those illustrated beforehand. Akbar was fond of the tale of Hamza Nama (Chatterjee, Ratnabali) and therefore under his command its illustration was taken up on an unprecedented measure. It consisted of 12 Unsewn Volumes with 1400 paintings illustrations. This magnificent work of art was finished in 15 years, but unluckily only one tenth survives scarcely, of this splendid series. Most of the existing folios are preserved in the Industrial Museum Vienna and in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London: a few folios are scattered in various other museums and private collections all over the world (Chatterjee, Ratnabali).

These illustrations are of unusually large size, measuring approximately two and a half feet by two feet. They are painted on cotton and the text is written on the reverse side. In all probability, the paintings were held up for view while the text was being read aloud. Hamza Nama series is too large to handle like a book writes Joan Cummins, and it appears that every folio had a complex illustration covering at least one side. The large paper sheets are mounted on cotton for support probably for performance (Cummins, Joan). In this aspect, the Hamza Nama paintings can be compared to illustrated legends- a form of entertainment still prevalent in the Indian Village fairs where the recitation of the story is supplemented by appropriate visuals. This Work of genius, was executed in the imperial atelier by fifty or more artists from various parts of India (Cummins, Joan) working under the direct supervision of the two famous Persian masters – Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad, who had accompanied Akbar's Father Humayun to India (Seyller, John). From several Indian Schools all over northern India. Emperor Akbar Brought artists to his Imperial studio. Under the supervision of two Persian masters, Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad. The Emperor achieved the completion of the 1400 illustrations of the Hamza Nama between the years 1562 and 1577, their large scale about 32/25 inches exceeds that of any book ever made in India. Its twelve volumes of illustrations represent the renaissance of Indian Painting (Roy, C Craven).

These carefully planned and meticulously executed paintings earn their prime place in the development of Mughal style by their uniqueness and innovative designing writes Ratnabali Chatterjee. A folio depicting 'Misbah the Grocer Brings the Spy Parran to his House' (Fig.1) shows the same exquisite designing. The amalgamation of the desperate elements occurred to unite and fuse into one consistent style in the Imperial Atelier and the unifying force was the Emperor's own imposing Personality combined with his intense interest in painting. Thus, a slashing style with bold colouring originated incredibly in short span of time.

## The Development of a Cohesive Style

The paintings of all the northern schools are two dimensional, the figures painted on monochrome ground. The figures in Safavid paintings however exist on the plane of the painting, where they float or are suspended according to mode of visualization, a conceptual perspective. In one illustration, a fisherman discovers an infant, the sole survivor of the shipwreck, as it floats on a raft (Fig.2). Middle Eastern elements as onion domes and tilted exteriors with Indian features such as stepped tower as of Hindu temple writes Joan Cummins. In the folios of the Hamza Nama, the various stylistic elements remain recognizable and yet not fully assimilated. The early pages are still within the Persian Safavi School, The composition delighting in symmetry and restraint, only the warmer tones in the colouring seem inconsistent. A certain coarseness can be detected in the drawing and this can very well be due to the largeness of scale of these pictures as the fact that they are done on cloth. In the later Paintings, The roughness is counteracted by a less harsh outline, exquisite colouring of tiled surfaces in architectures and rich textures (Tomory, Edith).

The paintings of the Hamza Nama, show profound figures. They are in its volumetric contents. They are modeled by line and shading in a way that rounded the limbs of the Ajanta. However, whereas the figures of Ajanta move in the compact space that they bring about by their three dimensional presence, the figures of the Hamza Nama exist in space filled settings. The characteristic provided by Safavid Paintings. As can be seen in 'Gardeners Beating the Giant Zamurraad who is trapped in a well' (Fig.3). In this painting Zamurraad Shah the fire worshipping Persian giant of vacillating loyalties, is depicted as an ungainly figure of fun, belaboured by gardeners as he strives to escape from a well. The painting also shows arrangement in the conceptual perspective.

Persian Paintings are organized according to a conceptual perspective. It comprises the so-called bird's eye view- an archaic convention that places one above the other figures or scenes meant to be understood as located behind one another, thus avoiding overlapping and multiple viewpoints. Thus, the floor of a room and its back walls are painted as adjacent areas distinct by their colour and their position. The rectangle of the wall is above the area allotted to the ground. Similarly, the top surface of a box is painted as if it were a lifted lid, a four-sided area above the rectangle of its front view (Kramrisch, Stella).

Persian painting makes the most clear-cut and logical use of conceptual perspective, it is essentially a painter's perspective. While it depicts it also defines objects and their position. Translating them in terms of the surface onto which they are transferred. The figures placed into this conceptual framework share its elegance in clear-cut, flowing silhouettes at their appointed places (Kramrisch, Stella). Single or shuffled in groups, they are accents, weightless presences, placed according to the story they illustrate. Their groups their spacing, the inclination of a head, the raising of a finger – all

show the story in its visualized form. Conceptual Perspective formed by colour fields and bounding line has its perfected form in Persian Painting of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Indian Painting rendered objects in Accordance with conceptual perspective, stressing, however the volumetric aspect of each figure or object. Rocks for instance are painted as conglomerations of cubes, each of them depicted simultaneously from the front and one or more sides. (Kramrisch, Stella) Conceptual perspective was used to render the compact solidity of each shape, be it a rock cube or the rounded limb of the human figure, the compactness of the figures and their contiguity fill the respective structural unit, the interior of a building or a scene out of doors.

The conceptual perspective of Safavid paintings remained the framework of the Hamza Nama Illustrations. It became filled with figures and shapes modelled from within and volumetric and in this respect, akin to those of Ajanta (Kramrisch, Stella). However, in the Hamza Nama Illustrations the modelled shapes of the human figures are not receptacles and conduits of the rhythm of the ongoing process of life. They are charged with concentrated, explosive energy. In it the Indian figures found their place, within ramparts, under canopies, within and outside buildings, in any spatial context setup by the conceptual perspective (Kramrisch, Stella).

The most striking feature of Hamza Nama folios is its dramatic action, often of such violence that it appears to burst through the picture-frame. This impression is intensified further by nearness of the figures to the picture plane. Against one of the characters in the story, looms large in some paintings. In others blood thirsty warriors chop away at their opponents amidst decapitated bodies, gushing blood and gaping wounds, and severed heads.

## Conclusion

In these illustrations artist have echoed considerably, the dispositions, the feelings, the concerns, and aspirations of their Imperial patron. They provide a key to his emotional states. In the coloristic depiction of these paintings, is found the formal expression of the struggle of Akbar's powerful intellect against the manifold problems of an empire in making. The Hamza Nama symbolizes the excitement and the ambitious fervor of Akbar's early years as emperor.

The Hamza Nama illustrations represent a renaissance of classical painting and a revolution in the art of its day. As in every revolution, the forces that led to it remained active in the new framework of which they became part. The driving force had found a form of its own in the planner style of the illustrations. Its impulsive vigor became part of the style of Hamza Nama Illustrations.



The other contributing factor was the classical and diminished tradition, reduced to only the modelling line as in the western and other Indian schools of the Sixteenth century. It was reborn in the Hamza Nama illustrations in Modelling capacity, which held a new vitality. The Indian components of the Hamza Nama style were ordered in conceptual perspective that had found its ultimate perfection in Safavid Painting which was the background of Akbar's artistic inheritance.

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## Pictures for references

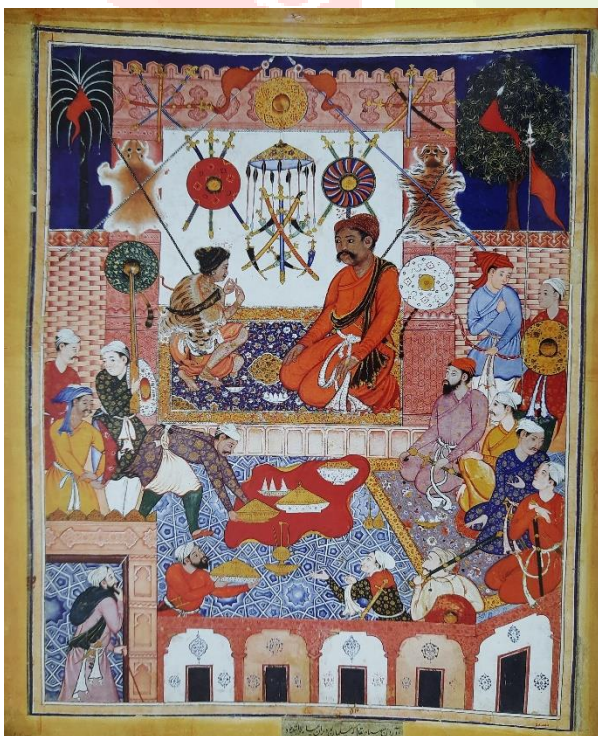


Fig.1 Misbah the Grocer Brings the Spy Parran to his House

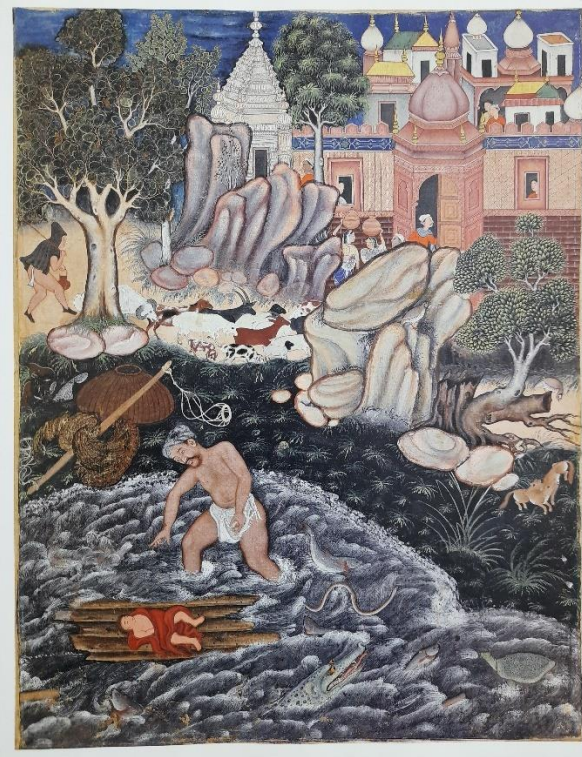


Fig.2 A Fisherman Discovers an Infant, The Sole Survivor of The Shipwreck, Floating on a Raft.

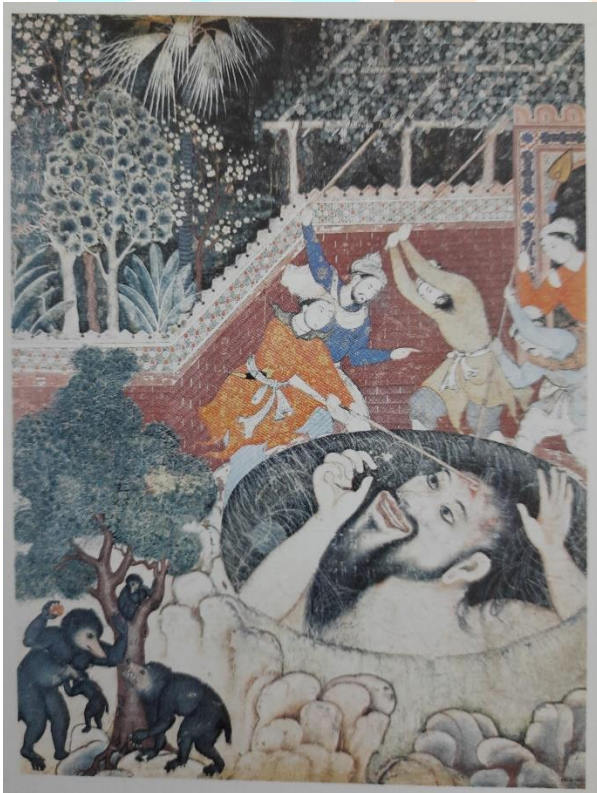


Fig.3 Gardeners Beating the Giant Zamurrad who is Trapped in a Well