



# GROWTH OF PAINTINGS DURING THE AKBAR ERA

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## Abstract :

The Mughal art is a combination of the Indo-Persian style which developed in India. It was influenced liberally by the existing Indian Rajput school. The Mughal school was found by Akbar under whom it developed into a class of its own. It was essentially a product of the Mughal court.

Keywords : Mughal Art, Akbar, Painting, Indo-persian, Mughal school.

## Introduction

Akbar was the first Mughal monarch who took a deep interest in the promotion of painting and following the Mongol and Timurid examples, he commissioned the work of illustrating numerous manuscripts. The artists of Akbar's court were drawn from within the country and also from Iran. The style that developed was the best of the Bihzad school and pre-Mughal Indian art, amalgamated with European and Chinese influences.

The Department of Asian Art, National Gallery of Victoria, in recent years has acquired three important Indian paintings and a related drawing belonging to the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar (r.1556–1605). These works span the full period of Akbar's active patronage, from his extraordinarily ambitious commissioning of the monumental Hamza-nama in the early 1560s through to the second imperial copy of his own biography, the Akbar-nama, in production around 1604–5. Each of the paintings is in the form of a single folio separated from a major illustrated manuscript of the Akbar period, namely the Hamza-nama, the Victoria and Albert Museum Akbar-nama, and the Chester Beatty Akbar-nama, which is, in fact, shared between that library and the British Museum. Substantial sections of the two copies of the Akbar-nama survive, though in each lacunae are frequent. Of the Hamza-nama it is estimated that less than one-tenth of the original 1400 paintings are extant.<sup>1</sup> Produced over forty years of Akbar's fifty-four year reign, these

works provide an insight into the stylistic dynamics of imperial painting at the Mughal court in the latter half of the 16th century.

Much of the paintings of the Akbari period show a restless energy. The painters reflected the exuberance of their patron, figures are shown in hurried movement and the compositions are crowded. As painting developed, the Mughal atelier lost its purely Persian characteristics and became increasingly Indian by the middle of Akbar's reign. By the middle of Akbar's reign, the skies lost their gold and lapis Lazuli tones to break out into brilliant sunset colours.

The principal patron, the emperor himself, inherited the throne at the age of thirteen in 1556 and, by 1600, had expanded and consolidated his precarious inheritance into the greatest empire seen in South Asia since the Guptas, a millenium earlier. The interests and preoccupations of early Mughal painting are closely identifiable with those of their imperial patron. They are reflections of both the richly cosmopolitan court which he cultivated and maintained and of his direct involvement as director of artistic activities and as principal critic. Abu'l Fazl records that the emperor directed that many books be illustrated, 'His Majesty having indicated the scenes to be painted'.<sup>1</sup> His description of the procedures followed at the court atelier reveal an extraordinary degree of patron involvement in the very processes of the art production. In addition he outlines clearly the criteria employed in making qualitative judgments of the works themselves:

Each week the several superintendents and clerks submit before the king the work done by each artist, and His Majesty gives a reward and increases the monthly salaries according to the excellence displayed. His Majesty looks deeply into the matter of raw materials and set a high value on the quality of production. As a result, colouring has gained a new beauty, and finish a new clarity ... Delicacy of work, clarity of line, and boldness of execution, as well as other fine qualities, have reached perfection, and inanimate objects appear to come alive.<sup>2</sup>

Abu'l-Fazl finds no higher praise for the quality of work of the artists assembled at Akbar's direction than to state that: 'a fine match has been created to the world-renowned unique art of Bihzad and the magic making of the Europeans'.<sup>3</sup>

The qualities praised in association with the paintings of Bihzad were those of delicacy and clarity. Sixteenth-century Islamic court painting is distinguished for its extreme refinement and fidelity, and an over-riding preoccupation with surface embellishment. The contribution of European art, known principally through engravings of Christian subjects distributed by evangelising Jesuits, was that of naturalism, to animate the figures and introduce atmospheric qualities into the landscape.

<sup>1</sup> P. Chandra, *The Tuti-nama of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz, 1976, p. 63. The extant paintings have been published by G. Egger, *Hamza-nama*, 3 vols, Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, Graz, 1976.

<sup>2</sup> A'in-i Akbari, in P. Chandra, op. cit., p. 184.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* Bihzad (d.1536-37) was the most esteemed 16th-century painter of the Islamic world, and through his influence at the court of Shah Tahmasp at Tabriz was known to the artists of the Mughal court. See R. Ettinghausen, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 1, Luzac & Co., London, 1960, pp. 1211-14.

Each of the four works to be discussed have historical subjects: a legendary epic-romance in the Hamzanama and contemporary historical events in the Akbar-nama folios. Together they demonstrate the Mughal preoccupation with history as an aspect of political legitimisation. The Islamic tradition upon which Akbar drew had a strongly developed tradition of history writing. The Mughal histories commissioned by Akbar were written in the court language, Persian, and followed the Islamic historiographic tradition in its narrative chronicle style. The official and private accounts which survive from Akbar's reign provide one of the most richly documented dynastic histories seen through contemporary eyes. For the study of early Mughal painting these writings, especially the official chronicle, the Akbar-nama, are of central importance. These writings provide not only passing reference to the activities of the artists and the appreciation of their works, but serve, in most instances, as the textual source for the paintings themselves.

Akbari painting is principally illustrative, concerned with recording and describing events. These may be historic, legendary, religious, or indeed contemporary, in the instance of an album of portraits of courtiers which Akbar directed be prepared.<sup>4</sup> Akbar's intellectual interests lay in the enjoyment of history and in religious enquiry and debate.<sup>5</sup> Copies of famous books, lavishly illustrated and sumptuously bound, were prepared for the imperial library. Where important texts did not exist in Persian, Akbar directed members of his court to undertake translations. Akbar was not the first Muslim ruler to initiate the translation of Sanskrit texts, but under his direction this interest in important literary and theological texts of the Hindu world flourished.<sup>6</sup> A translation bureau, the Maktab-Khana, was established at Fathpur-Sikri expressly for this purpose. Many of the key Hindu texts, including the Mahabharata, Ramayana and Yogvasishtha, were translated, along with Arab texts relating to folklore and astronomy and, later, Latin and Portuguese works of Christian theology. Many of these translations were richly illustrated and bound by the imperial atelier and workshop at Akbar's direction.

Akbar's motivation in instigating this translation and illumination project on such a large scale was two-fold. His own intellectual curiosity manifested itself in religious debates, to which he invited Hindu, Zoroastrian and Christian theologians to debate with their Muslim counterparts, and in the translation of important texts of the non-Muslim world. At a broader level Akbar appeared concerned to promote mutual understanding and tolerance between the Muslim and Hindu members of his court and administration. Added to this was the custom of the Islamic world which attached great prestige to the maintenance of an imperial library. Akbar's biographer, Abu'l-Fazl, in a list of the finest illustrated manuscripts commissioned for the imperial library, records the extent of this royal patronage:

<sup>4</sup> The existence of this album, now lost, is noted by Abu'l-Fazl. He praised it, for 'the dead have gained a new life, and the living an eternity' – A'in-i Akbari, in P. Chandra, op. cit., p. 184.

<sup>5</sup> See E. Wellesz, Akbar's Religious Thought Reflected in Mogul Painting, Allen & Unwin, London, 1952

<sup>6</sup> The pre-Mughal Afghan rulers of Delhi, mostly notably Sultan Sikander Lodi (r.1489–1517), had some Sanskrit texts translated. See S. A. Rizvi, Religious and Intellectual History of the Muslims in Akbar's Reign, Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1975, p. 204

Persian books of both prose and poetry were decorated and a great many large and beautiful compositions were painted ... The Chingiz-nama, the Zafar-nama, this book, the Razm-nama, the Ramayana, the Nal-Daman, the Kalila wa Dimma, the Iyar-i Danish, and other books have been illustrated ...<sup>7</sup>

Abu'l-Fazl's citing of 'this book' as one of the illustrated works refers to his newly completed Akbar-nama (of which the Ain-i Akbari is Part III), the imperial copy of which is largely preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and to which the Melbourne folio Defeat of Hemu appears to belong.

Abu'l-Fazl, writing in 1597–98, reserved special praise for the paintings of the Hamza-nama: 'The story of Hamza, put into twelve volumes, has been illustrated, and magic making masters have painted fourteen hundred astonishing pictures of as many incidents.'<sup>8</sup>

The painting Hamza disarming a Byzantine princess belongs to this unique manuscript and is the earliest Mughal painting in the Melbourne collection. The Hamza-nama paintings are exceptional on two counts, for their large scale, and for the use of a cloth rather than paper ground. The Melbourne Hamza-nama depicts the hero of the legend, Hamza, disturbed from his rest by a female intruder who has entered his tent enclosure. He is sheltered by a conical canopy richly decorated in orange, blue and gold. Subsidiary scenes of resting guards fill the space below. Flaming torches indicate a night scene. Lighting, however, remains even, the camels beyond the tent enclosure as legible as the horse in the foreground. The tree is broadly painted, its profile heavily contoured and its leaves individually articulated. The camels are painted with fine hatched strokes which gives them a lively expressiveness. The broad composition and some of its decorative elements belong to a late 15th-century Herati style. However, an attempt to introduce a dramatic element in a naturalistic style is evident.

The Persian tradition as it had developed particularly under Bihzad in the later years of the 15th century, was notable for its decorative qualities and its lively sense of colour. The miniatures were usually book illustrations and were 2-D. The artists representing the different regions of India had brought with them not only the skill in painting but also their conventions in regard to drawings, use of colour and composition. Akbar had left the painters very much to their own devices. The atelier of Akbar thus created the Mughal style of painting. Certain conventions and types of figures were developed and these principles continued to be followed thereafter. The Mughal paintings now exhibited three-dimensional effects in contrast to the 2-dimensional Persian ones.

The Mughal artist ingeniously combined the ancient Ajanta technique of perspective with that of contemporary western artists. In the multiple perspectives used on ancient Buddhist frescoes painters tried to suggest space by depicting figures simultaneously at eye level and from above, the direct view and the hierarchical perspective, placing figures in their order of importance and giving a kind of bird's eye view of the scene. By means of walls, rocks, cliffs and buildings certain figures were brought into the foreground

<sup>7</sup> Ain-i Akbari, in P. Chandra, op. cit., p. 184.

<sup>8</sup> ibid

and other set in the distance. This form, combined with the European use of receding background, helped to give Mughal miniatures their perspective. The drawing of cliffs, buildings and trees was replaced in the seventeenth century by grouping of minor characters arranged in semi circular form, leaving a distinct space for the main figure. In the Ajanta tradition, a thin line of shading encloses the outline of the figures.

The Mughal miniatures make use of the same device. All the personages in the picture are connected by gesture, facial expression and proper positioning, and a harmonious balance is maintained in the composition. The striving for harmony resulted in the depiction of individual part of the body from different angles, with the legs and body in profile and the face in semi profile and some times in reverse profile. The features of the face were also often portrayed from different angles.

## Conclusion

Without Akbar the mughal empire and its art would be known only to specialists. The empire refunded, he was one of India's wisest and mightiest rulers, whose energy and inspiration sparked his followers to peak performances. When Humayun died, prince Akbar although not yet fourteen, was already soldiering in the, having been sent to the mountains with an army to expel the ex-king, Sikander Shah Afghan. Bairam Khan, one of his father's abler generals, improvised a throne on which the boy began his reign. Later, as regent, Bairam Khan brought stability to the shaky kingdom and enabled the young ruler to grow with some degree of tranquillity.

The most remarkable artistic project from Akbar's reign is the "Hamza Nama", a series of grand pictures on cotton describing the fabulous adventures of Amir Hamza, an uncle of the Prophet.

All facts it is clearly stated that Mughal painting during Akbar reign point to the fact that the artists had to conform to the common feature of style and form as long as they were in the employment of the imperial court. The more talented artists of the Mughal Court were kept engaged in carrying out the allotted assignments with the help of Junior colleagues. The well known, usual method was for the master artist to lay down the design sketch the outlines and indicate the colours. The junior associates handled the details of inner lines, shades and tonalities; usually more than one copy of an illustrated manuscript was made-one for the royal library and additional ones for gifts to diplomats and favourites.

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