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MUGHAL PAINTING

By Dr. Sanobar Haider*

Mughal painting marks a unique a blending of Persian and Indian ideas. Mughal painting was essentially a court art, developed under the patronage of the ruling Mughal emperors and began to decline when the rulers lost interest. The subjects treated were generally secular, revolving around themes like battles, court scenes, receptions, legendary stories, hunting scenes, wildlife, portraits, and the likes . Imperial Mughal painting represents one of the most celebrated art forms of India. It arose with remarkable rapidity in the mid-sixteenth century as a blending of three distinct traditions:

- 1) Court painting of Safavid Iran,
- 2) Indigenous Indian devotional manuscript illumination, and;
- 3) Indo-Persian or Sultanate painting, which is itself is a hybrid of provincial Persian and local Indian styles.

The result of this merging resulted in paintings of unprecedented vitality, brilliant coloration, and impossibly precise detail, is something dramatically more than the sum of its parts.



(Illustration 1)

Mughal Painting owes its existence virtually to the patronage of the “Great Mughals” who ruled India for a few hundred years. The paintings cover a period of about a hundred and fifty years, approximately from 1580-1730 A.D. Witnessing its greatest perfection in about 1620 A.D. The individual paintings can be classified as belonging to the “school” of one or other emperors.

Mughal painting forms a dramatic episode in the history of India. Its aims and standpoint are secular and realistic: it is interested in passing events and most typically in the exact delineation of individual character in the portraiture of men and animals. It is dramatic rather than static, aristocratic more than surreal and academic rather than vocational.

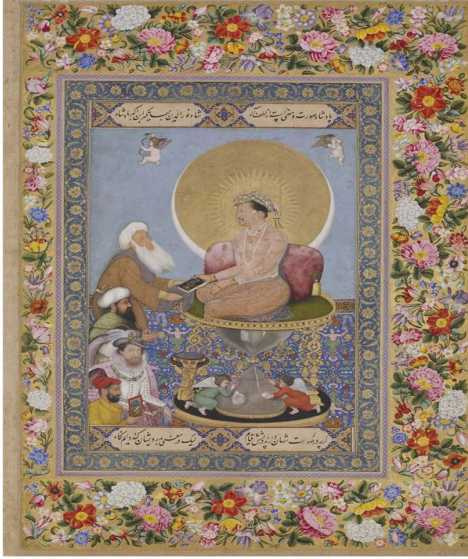
The credit for the development of Mughal painting goes to Akbar and Jahangir. The former possessed a library of 24000 Manuscripts, many of which were illustrated, and his biographer, Abul Fazl, records him as saying-

‘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 the limbs one after another must come to feel that he cannot

bestow a soul upon his work and is thus forced to thank god, the giver of life, and will thus increase his wisdom.’

It was under Jahangir that Mughal painting attained its greatest perfection. Jahangir constantly refers to the court painters in his memories and mentions the valuable presents and the honours which he bestowed upon them. During his reign, Abul Hasan, the son of the Iranian painter Aqa Reza grew up in his household and became so valued as a court artist that he was called "Nadiru'l Zaman" - Wonder of the Age. This reflects painting's high status at Jahangir's court. Jahangir wrote:

"My liking for painting and my practice in judging it have arrived at such a point that when any work is brought before 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."



(Illustration 2)

In the year 1567 Akbar ordered the preparation of a lavishly illustrated manuscript of the Persian translation of the “Hamzanama”, the celebrated Arab epic about a legendary Hamza. Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad were appointed to lead a group of roughly and hundred painters. The projects took 15 years to complete, and most of the Indian pointers who founded the Mughal school were trained during that period. One of the leading painters at Akbar’s court was a potter’s son Daswanth. He used to paint figures on walls, and Akbar, impressed by his talent, sent him to Abdus Samad around 1575.



(Illustration 3)

Another painter Basawan was equally talented. Abul Fazl claims that he excelled in ‘preparing backgrounds, drawing of features, distribution of colours, portrait painting and in several other branches.

Painting had become a very important aspect of Mughal culture during the previous reign of Akbar. In his tenure's official history, the Akbarnama , contained vivid, dynamic pictures, but it was Jahangir who really loved this art. He had paintings made of rare birds from Goa and spring flowers in Kashmir. History records that when James I's ambassador, Sir Thomas Roe, visited the Mughal court in 1616

he disparaged Jahangir's painters in comparison to the miniature he had with him by the English artist Isaac Oliver. Within three weeks Jahangir showed him copies by his artists, challenging him to identify the original. Roe admitted that it was indeed very difficult.

Mughal Court paintings provide an insight into the life and times of rulers of the period. These paintings also reflect the contemporary social and political condition of the people. Social customs and courtly traditions are vividly depicted in these paintings. Presence of the foreign ambassadors goes a long way in establishing that the Mughal rulers had active trade connections with foreign countries. Thus it can be concluded that these paintings are great story tellers and are very informative, providing us with deep insights into the life and times of the Mughals.



(Illustration 4)

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3. Aspects of Mughal Painting Vol. 1- S.P.Verma , Abhinav Publications.
4. Mughal Painting: An Interplay Of Indigenous And Foreign Traditions - Ashok Kumar Srivastava (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd)

Illustrations:

1. Akbar visits the tomb of Khwajah Moin ud-Din Chishti at Ajmer- Basawan.
2. Bichitr's painting titled 'Jehangir preferring a Sufi Sheikh to Kings' that now hangs in Washington DC.
3. A portrait of King Jahangir by Abul Hassan in 1617.
4. Noah's Ark, from the Akbarnama, attributed to Miskin.

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