

## Aide Memoire LO10

### Indian Minatures Art Forms

The almost infinite styles of the Indian Miniature Art forms are classified into various schools. The more prominent among them are the Jain paintings, Rajasthani, Mughal, and the Pahari schools. These are then further classified into the various other forms, such as the Basholi, Kangra,

#### The Mughal School

Emperor Humayun, second in the line of Mughal rulers, is acclaimed to be the first documented patron of Mughal painting. It was under him that the *Dastan-e-Amir-Hamza*<sup>i</sup> was created. In these works, the first influence of Persian art is visible. Thus, the Persian, Central Asian and Indian elements mingled together and out of this synthesis, a new style, known as 'Mughal Style' was born.

The Persian tradition is visible through the use of brilliant colours, elaborate embellishment of costumes and the lavish use of gold. The deep blue skies flat in tone, occasionally with a few birds or stars, hills with a river or a storm, trees laden with flowers and the frequently used figures imposed on one another all indicate a Persian influence.

The Indian traits are noticeable in the gestures of hand and face, elongated eyes, long straight tree trunks, stylised trees and leaves, and also by the water surface covered with lotus flower or

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<sup>i</sup> An important work which narrates the fantastic exploits of Amir Hamza, the uncle of the prophet of Islam. An illustrated manuscript of the *Hamzanama*, an artistic masterpiece was created about 1558–1573 under the Mughal emperor Akbar.

shown by zig-zag lines with a fish or two. The fusion of the Indian and Persian styles had, in fact, begun even before the advent of Babur (the first Mughal emperor) and the earliest example appear in the illustrated pages of the *Niamat-nama*, a cookery book written in around 1500 A.D.

Also, the introduction of perspectives and three dimensional effects, and that of calligraphy and occasional use of the dragon point to a Chinese influence. The Mughal period was the golden age for the art of Indian Miniatures, as many new styles developed and the particular art form flourished.

## **The Mughal painting workshop *karkhana*<sup>ii</sup>**

“Akbar laid the foundations of Mughal painting, a unique confluence of Persian, Indian, and European art. The emperor rejected the orthodox view that artists transgressed by seeking to rival God's creation and insisted that they felt all the more humble before God's omnipotence because they could not infuse painted figures with life.

The Mughal emperors, who received instruction in painting as part of their education, cultivated the art of the book with a rare passion. Their exquisite volumes were placed on stands, each individual page scrutinized for its elegant lines and delicate brushwork, which needed to be enlarged to be fully appreciated (the glass lens was already in use at this time).

During his flight from Agra, the emperor Humayun never lost sight of his book collection; his first thoughts on returning to Agra were of his library, and it was from its steps that he fell to his death.

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<sup>ii</sup> This is an extract from *Indian Art* by Partha Mitter, Oxford Press which in my opinion gives an excellent overview of the subject matter

We owe much valuable information on the production and consumption of art in India to the Mughal period. While in exile in Iran and Afghanistan, Humayun invited the Persian artists Abd us-Samad and Mir Sayyid Ali to set up a royal workshop (*karkhana*) in Agra.

Abu'l Fazl gives us details of this workshop, which was inherited by Akbar and turned by him into one of the largest artistic establishments of the time. Muslim *karkhanas* were collaborative enterprises comprising paper makers, calligraphers, illuminators, gilders, illustrators, and binders, all supervised by a master. However, Akbar's *karkhana* was more hierarchical than the Persian ones, the master being in charge of the composition, while the execution was left to junior artists.

Paper, initially imported from Iran, began to be manufactured in the Punjab from the sixteenth century. Paints were made from animal, vegetable, and mineral substances, brushes from animal hair. The production of artist's materials was controlled for quality during Akbar's reign. Many layers of paper were glued on top of one another to form a 'hardboard' painting surface. This was primed, burnished with agate and then a freehand drawing was made or a stencil traced onto it. The preliminary brush drawing was done in red or black paint, the burnishing repeated after each stage of painting, giving a dazzling finish.

Safavid painting, introduced by the two Persian masters, continued to be the model, while regularly imported stencils indicated the colours to be used. The work was divided among different artists specializing in foundation drawing, background, figure work, and portraiture, only master painters being allowed to do the outline drawing.



### ***Painters at Akbars court***

From the attention lavished on miniature paintings in the Mughal period one might imagine that wall paintings had gone out of favour. This is, however, disproved by ample literary evidence, their depiction in miniatures, and from surviving fragments on walls. But undoubtedly the ablest artists and most ambitious works were connected with the art of the book.

The artist continued to be a craftsman who had no independent status. As late as the time of Shah Jahan, painters born in the imperial household were called *khanazad* (second-generation servants). Artists, their children, and their apprentices were part of the imperial household, which met all their needs. The Mughal painters Abu'l Hasan, son of Aqa Riza, and Manohar, son of Basawan, were born in the imperial household during Akbar's reign. Given training from an early age, they graduated from pattern books to the human figure, and practice in the drawing of flowers was meant to arouse their aesthetic feeling.

The highly competitive atmosphere at the court spurred artists to surpass themselves. The emperors conducted weekly inspections of paintings attended by courtiers, who offered criticisms. Out of over a hundred painters, including the woman artist **Nadira Banu**, about a dozen rose to prominence as masters with distinctive skills and personalities. They were rewarded with high positions and honours. Abu'l Fazl's *Ain i-Akbari* ranks artists in order of merit. However, before the reign of Akbar's son Jahangir it is less common to find individual artists signing specific paintings. This raises the question: in these collaborative works, to what extent can we ascribe an artistic style to the patrons taste or to artistic personality?

The frenzied movement, feverish activity, clashing colours, and high drama which characterize the paintings of Akbar's early

period have been attributed to his taste, much as Jahangir's introverted personality is seen to be mirrored in the intimate works of his reign. But it is equally interesting that the two leading artists at Akbar's court, **Daswanth** and **Basawan**, seem to have left a clear stamp of their temperaments on their art. The brief, tragic life of Daswanth is the stuff of romance, reflecting the topos of genius better known in the West than in India. Considered by Abu'l Fazl to be the finest Mughal painter, a view fully shared by Akbar, Daswanth became a legendary figure in his lifetime. The son of a humble palanquin bearer, his compulsive habit of drawing on walls brought him to Akbar's notice, who arranged for Abd us-Samad to train him. Daswanth *'became matchless in his time. ..but the darkness of insanity enshrouded the brilliance of his mind, and he died a suicide'*, writes Abu'l Fazl. It is interesting to note that this is the only recorded case of self-conscious artistic neurosis in pre-modern India; Daswanth has been identified with particularly dramatic, expressionist works, and it is significant that after his death in 1584 Mughal painting moved away from a Dionysian frenzy towards an Apollonian lyricism associated with the other master, **Basawan**. According to Abu'l Fazl, our invaluable guide in these matters, in designing, painting faces, colouring, portrait painting, and other aspects of this art,

Basawan has come to be uniquely excellent. Many perspicacious connoisseurs give him preference over Daswantha. Basawan focused on pictorial composition, subtle tones, foreshortening, and the complex arrangement of figures in a landscape, evidence of his exposure to European art.

Akbar's workshop under Mir Sayyid Ali and Abd us-Samad recruited Indian painters in large numbers, whose formative works are preserved in the *Tuti Nama* ( the Tales of a Parrot, a popular

Indian folk tale, completed in the mid-sixteenth century). Even though Safavid and Timurid artists continued to serve in Akbar's workshop, it was the immediacy of feeling in western Indian art that enabled Mughal painting to cut its Persian umbilical cord, namely the Safavid subordination of detail to an overall formal arrangement. The *Tuti Nama* is valuable also for showing us how young Gujarat artists such as Daswanth and Basawan were in the process of absorbing Persian art. Work began on the first landmark in Mughal art, *Hamza Nama*, in around 1562, its overall unity imposed by the workshop. The mythical adventures of the Prophet's uncle, Amir Hamza, interspersed with moral lessons, were illustrated with paintings on a larger format than the average Safavid works (14 x 10 inches) and painted on cotton rather than paper. Rediscovered in the nineteenth century, some 200 out of 1,400 works have survived (mainly in the Österreichisches Museum für Angewandte Kunst, Vienna and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London). While the visual impact of objects, such as brightly coloured polychrome tiles and richly patterned carpets, together with the luminous colours of Safavid painting liberated Indian artists from their hitherto limited palette, they themselves brought freshness to details such as the leaves of trees or women drawing water from a well. But, above all, the dramatic and violent movement depicted in the *Hamza Nama* is alien to the remote, ordered sensibility of the Safavid artist.

As part of his objective of gaining Hindu confidence, Akbar turned to the Sanskrit epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* soon after the arrival of learned Brahmins at the House of Worship in Sikri in 1580. These were translated, and provincial governors were instructed to make copies of them in an effort to disseminate Hindu classics throughout the empire. The second major painting series, for the *Razm Nama*, the Persian translation of the *Mahabharata*, was



commenced in 1582 under the supervision of Daswanth, the emperor's favourite

### ***History painting***

The powerful drawing style developed in these two early projects with their depiction of psychologically related figures laid the foundations of Akbar's history painting. A revolutionary development in Indian art, Akbar's historical narratives perfectly express his theory of kingship: in every painting the sovereign assumes his role as the chief actor in the historical spectacle taking place before us. An archival office headed by Abu'l Fazl and manned by 14 clerks made faithful records of daily events, while court officials were encouraged to write their memoirs. Although this obsession with detail earned the dynasty the sobriquet '*paper government*', it is thanks to Abu'l Fazl's *Akbar Nama* (History of Akbar) and *Ain i-Akbari* (Laws of Akbar) that we get an unrivalled insight into the age and into the mind of the great emperor. And if Abu'l Fazl was too close to the throne to be objective, the corrective was supplied by Badauni, the orthodox historian who disapproved of Akbar's liberalism.. Akbar was in need of a narrative style that could do justice to his eventful reign, which revolved round the court, the hunt, and the battlefield. The earliest example of an illustrated text used as an exercise in political legitimization, *Timur Nama* (History of Timurlang) traces Akbar's genealogy back to the illustrious Mongol warrior. It is significant that the paintings in this text constantly juxtapose Akbar with Timurlang. For instance, scenes of Akbar hunting are modelled on those of Timurlang. The central text of Akbar's reign, however, was the *Akbar Nama*, the illustration of which was entrusted to Basawan, who rose to prominence after Daswanth's suicide. Akbar's search for a convincing pictorial 'reporting' style was aided by his discovery of

European art, traces of which can be discerned in works as early as the *Hamza Nama*. However, his meeting with the Portuguese came at a significant moment. In 1572, on his visit to Cambay, on the Gujarat coast, the emperor gave an audience to the Portuguese officials who were keen to extend their economic hold in India. Six years later, the Jesuits arrived at Fatehpur Sikri to participate in religious debates, bearing gifts that included an illustrated Royal Polyglot Bible, published in Antwerp by Christopher Plantin in 1568. Akbar, his courtiers, and his artists must have poured eagerly over these 'wonderful works of the European painters who have attained worldwide fame'.

Akbar built up a collection of European religious paintings (his favourite subject), as well as secular ones, together with engravings tapestries, and a musical organ. The actual absorption of European conventions by Mughal artists cannot be dated precisely, although it is known that European prints began flooding the empire in the late sixteenth century. The first stage of wonder and experimentation probably gave way to selective appropriation. Among early responses, there exists a precocious copy of St John from Durer's Crucifixion by the 13-Year-old Abu'l Hasan.. At the end of Akbar's reign, the impact of Mannerism begins to be palpable, as for instance in the night scene from Jami's Baharistan, painted by Miskina, who uses subtle atmospheric light and deep dramatic colours. ....”