

Mughal painting in its sequel

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Note: To commemorate the 38th death anniversary of renowned historian ABM Habibullah we are reprinting one of his articles on Mughal painting. The article was first published in *Pakistan Quarterly* in Spring, 1959.

It is perhaps possible to formulate the classical qualities of Mughal painting, but it is less easy to point to a given work or a group of works and to say "Here is a definite example wherein everyone of those characteristics is fully and exclusively manifested," and which, thereby, completely isolate the work from other groups or styles of painting. For, Mughal painting was highly eclectic. While three broad streams – Persian, Indian and European – have long been recognized to have mingled in its formative course, historical research has not yet fully established the manner and the medium through which the indigenous tradition reached the imperial court.

Was it the Gujrati secular style of palm-leaf manuscript illustration which recognizably bridged the gap between the mural tradition of Bagh and Ajanta and the pseudo-miniature technique of the Hamza-Namah paintings? Or is it of no significance that in treatment, theme, colour and costume the Indian elements in this earliest Mughal painting as also the 17th century Rajasthani paintings have more striking resemblance with the central or west Indian book illustration (the 'Bundela Primitives') like those on the *Baramasa* or *Chaurapanchasika* manuscripts, written in a mixed Gujrati-Marwari script and ascribed to a date somewhere in the middle of the 16th century?

It is only of late that the existence and fruitful contribution of a Deccani school of painting has been admitted, a school centred largely in Bijapur and Ahmadnagar. The Persian or Islamic qualities of this school, evident in the decorative elements of colour, costume, and foliage, and in examples attributable to a date earlier than or at least contemporary with the earliest examples of Mughal paintings, were received through

thematic and artistic autonomy of the age. This process has often been overlooked.

Coomaraswamy's nomenclature has come to be modified now: even his 'Pahari' sub-division of the Rajput school – distinguishing the productions of the Punjab Hill states – is now being given up for more exact territorial specifications. Kangra and Basohli, the two hill states whose names were popularly used till a decade ago to differentiate the two major stylistic variations in the paintings of these Hill states, are no longer favoured by exact scholars. This Basohli school, again, was a few years ago, held to be a derivative from Rajputana which, in its turn, assimilated the refinements of line and colour and much else, from the Mughal miniature tradition. On the other hand,

complementary.

In the pictorial arts like portrait and genre pictures this elegant and contemplative living is the keynote; life became spacious, refined and ornamental. The pietra dura of the elegant marble pavilions with slender pilasters and kiosks of the 17th century Mughal buildings are of a piece with the delicate, sensitive drawing and colour of the paintings. The Arts became romantic in purpose and dainty and fastidious in execution, designers, craftsmen and artists all writing poetry in their own medium. The heavy repetitiveness of this mood is balanced only by the ever-increasing technical perfection achieved through meticulous finish of the minutest detail.

MUGHAL INFLUENCE

As this language began to absorb the Mughal artistic temper its rhythm and exuberant vitality only assumed a new purpose. Its repertoire was enriched by subjects of poetry, romance and genre scenes, its architectural designs became more pretty and sensuous, even its colour scheme took on softer shades of green, blue and brown and learnt to use the neutral "body-colour". But it was long before its intellectualism or accented linearism and rhythmic conception of form gave way to a formalized statement in delicate drawing and modelled colour. And yet, at least in the earlier phase of this contact as will be seen from a miniature by Mir Kalan Khan, a late 17th century Deccani artist, there is an obvious case



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PHOTO:
NASIR ALI MAMUN

The largeness of mind and the bold, creative energy of which Akbar was the embodiment, is, for example, the central impulse which one finds translated in the architectural and the visual arts of his age.



'Attendant killing a snake' by Mir Kalan Khan, late 17th century , Johnson Collection.

The designs of carpets, shawls, textiles and silks or in the jade and crystal wares of Shahjahan's period are architectonic to an extent which can only be understood by recalling the part which architecture occupied at this period and to which all the other crafts were more less complementary.

the contacts which the Deccani Muslim states had with the Timurid and Safavid Iran. In the growing maturity of the Imperial Mughal style as also in its local variety the Rajasthani or the primitive Rajput painting, the pictorial tradition of the south, thus played a demonstrably important part. Attention has also been drawn to another possible stream of tradition from Kashmir which supplied a number of artists to the Mughal atelier.

DISINTEGRATION

As with its rise and development, so with the process of the disintegration, research is finding ever new material of high significance. Coomaraswamy coined the term 'Rajput' to distinguish what, in fact, has since generally come to be regarded as an evolution of Mughal style using local Hindu themes. Even if it is considered a separate school, its ancestry can hardly be traced to beyond the 16th century, for its blood-relations are many and we have not yet come to a point when a definitive list of these can be made.

As the intellectual and material control of the Imperial Mughal court loosened, from the 18th century, regional diversities set the pattern. Even Delhi, the heart of the imperial style, when no longer able to unify, tried to reinforce it with feeble attempts under Muhammad Shah and Shah Alam, to rediscover and adapt its tradition to the

scholars assessed the Kangra school, even if it was an expansion of the early 18th century Guler painting, as "the glorious combination of the Hindu spirit and Mughal line and technique," whose draughtsmanship and spaciousness of landscape transformed the bookish intellectualism of the Hindu pictorial tradition.

MUGHAL ART AT ZENITH

Underlying all these changing opinions about the origin and sequel of Mughal Art is the implied admission that the term should really be applied not so much to a fully matured, sharply distinguishable style as to a process and growth of an artistic tradition, albeit centred on the royal court, whose working can be observed in Architecture as in Fine and Applied Arts. Mughal Art is thus best viewed horizontally rather than vertically. The largeness of mind and the bold, creative energy of which Akbar was the embodiment, is, for example, the central impulse which one finds translated in the architectural and the visual arts of his age. After him this energy tended to be suffused, and for the most part of the 17th century the prevailing temper was one of repose, of contemplation of the environment, an eager cultivation of the graces of living in its monumental and spiritual aspects. Artistic creations of this period respond to this note. Architecture and objects d'art embody an approach which is naturalesque rather than naturalistic.

A sincere delight in the form and colour of the world of man in its most decorative aspects is a striking feature of the visual and functional arts of the period of Jehangir and Shahjahan. This produced idealized and abstract versions of the form, colour and situations perceived by the senses which, through a circumstantial disorder consequent on growing indifference to the Arts, soon tended to be merely pretty and conventional. The designs of carpets, shawls, textiles and silks or in the jade and



'A Hindu Princess worshipping' by Fatehchand, 18th century.

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DISSOLUTION AND ASSIMILATION

It is at this point that Mughal art came nearest to shedding its courtly aloofness and to absorbing, in visibly large doses, the poetry of India's life and traditions. Politics of course provided the mechanics of this situation, although beginnings can be traced to the Akbari forms of architecture and the pictorialization of the Indian musical modes (Ragas) whose earliest known examples cannot be anterior to the middle of the 16th century.

Extension of this poetical element in Mughal art, expressed in languages familiar to the artists and craftsmen, set the pattern in the 18th century. Local versions enriched this pattern but rarely departed from the general scheme. In Rajputana and in the Punjab Hills romantically conceived buildings continued to be erected with the feminine charm of dainty columns, low balustraded terrace, graceful kiosks, foliated archways, and pavilions, false niches and sensuously formed domes, but each speaking in its own dialect. In the Hindu areas, unlike Awadh or the Deccan, the dialect consisted of an approximation of the folk tradition perceptible for example, in the use of the semi-circular cornice of the kiosks, derived from the accentuated curve of the Hindu *chatri*, covering the *howdah*, or in the more uninhibited use of figural ornamentation in relief or in colour.

MUSLIM KINGDOMS OF DECCAN

In the Deccan where it arrived late, the Mughal psyche found an idiom of great expressive power. It was derived from the vigour and exuberant sculptural quality of the pictorial art of the South. An emphatic statement of form in its most rhythmic rather than in its rounded plastic aspect -- an element absorbed from the southern Art of the post Ajanta period -- is noticeable in several buildings of the Adil Shahis of Bijapur and also in a few Baridshahi monuments at Bidar. In a more pronounced manner, the 16th century Bijapur and Ahmadnagar paintings display the same qualities, but here they are achieved through the technical refinements of colour and line-drawing which resulted from two centuries of close cultural contact with the Timurid and Safavid Persia, and her miniature. This Art, aiming to produce decorative effect through a sophisticated combination of flowing line and brilliant, vivid colour, and so indifferent to volume and depth, suited the growing two dimensionalism of Deccani painting.

A heightened linear accent, an emphasis on the flowing rhythm of curves with sharp, crisp contour drawing and an almost total absence of highlighting or modulation of colour--result of what has been called the mediaeval factor of Indian Art-- and worked on a schematically ornamented background, gave the productions of the Deccani Muslim courts a recognizable identity. Judging from the surviving examples treatment of the elements assimilated from local life and thought is not in the lucid, narrative manner of the 17th century Mughal artists but with a broad touch of intellectuality which pervades but never obscures the visual fact. In detached portraiture or in manuscript illustration there is also a trace of symbolism in iconography and in figural attitude-- this forming almost a conventional language.

with which the charm and elegant feminine grace of the Mughal genre pictures have been assimilated in the Deccani idiom.

This miniature, with the one other reproduced here, belongs to the Johnson collection, now in the India Office Library and found late in the 18th century mostly in the Deccan. The artist's signature Mir Kalan Khan appears only with [the work titled] *Attendant killing a snake*, which, judging from the existence of another copy now in the Leningrad Museum, would seem to illustrate an incident of some popular tale like the *Sukaspati* (Persian version known as *Tutinama*). There is much in it that belongs to the growing north-Indian Mughal tradition the recently absorbed European elements for example, in the naturalistic rendering of the tasselled curtain, the attempt to indicate depth by a graduated obscuring of the background or the conventionalized rendering of the evening sky against a gathering dusk.

But these do not yet obscure the essentially Deccani vision. The stressed rhythm of the sinuous body and the exuberant, complicated curves of the richly patterned costume and jewellery of the ladies recall the 16th century Ahmadnagar-Bijapur paintings whose conventional traces can be observed even in the late 18th century Kurnool and Haiderabad portraits. Even more obvious is the presentation of the principal female figures, in terms of supple, sharply drawn two-dimensional lines almost in a classic *tribhanga* pose whose certain sculptural grace is rarely to be found in contemporary Mughal figure drawings. The flying birds used as decorative space-fillers recall a 15th century Timurid archaism which Mughal painting hardly ever used. Excitement and animation of the scene is, however, in sharp contrast with the restful, languid mood of the whole composition, the reptile writhing in death as the maid triumphantly turns to her mistress whose expression is one of amazement than fright; the soft but excited approach of the inquisitive cat, portrayed with great understanding and accuracy, is matched by the gentle receding light on the walls and the motionless swans.

In a genre picture treating of nearly the same theme in a background of midnight solitude, painted by Fatehchand, an 18th century north-Indian artist -- '*A Hindu Princess worshipping*' -- the point of divergence with the Deccani *qalam* is obvious in the formalized composition and sentimental description of the accessory details: symmetrical arrangement of the figures, the haloed head, the suggestive moon on a deep blue sky treated like a cloth ceiling, the fully illuminated details, and complete absence of shadows, the balustraded terrace, the soft, clean features of the youthful females drawn in full profile and diversified only by the modulated tints of red, green, pink, blue and yellow, and the whole scene enclosed within an avoid frame enlivened by abstract floral devices. This sophisticated presentation of lyrical themes in terms of conventionalized elements of poetry absorbed from the people's experience formed the spiritual basis of 18th century Mughal Art, which in its final phases, spent its force in a vain attempt to express itself in a wholly different language received from the West.