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# **Workshop and Patron** in Mughal India

*The Freer Rāmāyaṇa and Other Illustrated Manuscripts of 'Abd al-Rahīm*

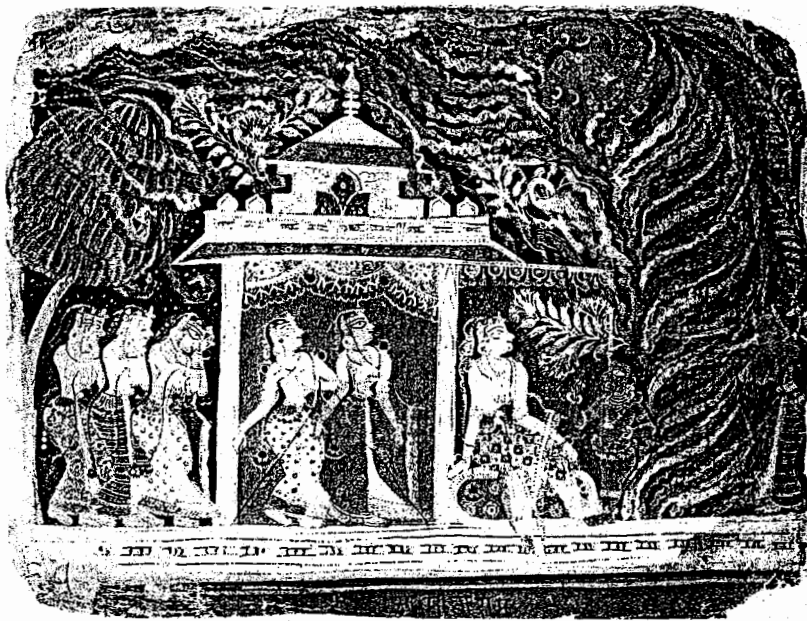
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### *The Formation of the Mughal Style*

Just as the Mughals' decision to tap the philosophical and literary heritage of India continued a long tradition of cultural appropriation, so too did their profound cultivation of painting build upon a longstanding appreciation of the visual arts in both the Persian-speaking world and northern India. Literary sources testify to the once-flourishing practice of adorning the surfaces of palaces and temples with painting. Our knowledge of the ancient Indian mural tradition is woefully inadequate, however, being limited to a few sites with fragmentary remains, of which the fifth-century rock-cut caves at Ajanta and the twelfth-century monastery at Alchi are the best-known examples. Small illustrated copies of the sacred books of Buddhists, Jainas, and Hindus were less vulnerable to the vicissitudes of harsh weather and human destruction, and so have been preserved in much greater numbers in examples dated



1.  
Kṛṣṇa vanquishes a demon in the form of a whirlwind.  
*Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. ca. 1520. Freer Gallery of Art 1987.4.

as early as the mid-eleventh century. Colophons written at the conclusion of these palm-leaf or paper manuscripts indicate that the books were usually prepared at the behest of wealthy lay members of various religious communities, who presented them to local temples as a conspicuous and enduring expression of piety. Such gifts undoubtedly contributed to their donors' social standing in the community.

The artists who produced these works were usually not named, and thus gained neither religious merit nor permanent artistic renown. We can surmise that they worked on commission for anyone with the resources and desire for their services. To judge from the remarkable stylistic consistency of painting executed across much of northern India throughout the late fifteenth and sixteenth century, it appears that individual patrons had little effect on the style of painting employed by these artists.

Paintings most often took the shape of a series of loose leaves, almost always horizontal in orientation, which were placed between decorated wooden covers but not otherwise bound. Images gradually displaced the written word on the folio over the course of the fifteenth century. In fact, written information was soon relegated to the form of a short caption above or below the painting, or a somewhat longer selection of verses on the reverse.

A page from a dispersed manuscript of the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* of circa 1520 represents the indigenous Indian tradition at its best (fig. 1). The young Kṛṣṇa subjugates a demon who has assumed the form of a terrifying whirlwind; fresh from his conquest, the blue-skinned deity reappears before his mother. Both events transpire in a single plane, which is broken up by a simple architectural structure and three different colored backgrounds. These devices isolate the compact groups of female onlookers, whose large eyes, blockish profiles, curvaceous bodies, and richly patterned skirts are constant features of this style.



2.

A school scene. By Mīr Sayyid 'Alī. ca. 1540. Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of Art S86.0221. 27 × 15.1 cm.

The rhythmic poses of the repeated figures, the vigorous draftsmanship, and the juxtaposition of solid patches of bright color combine to produce an image of enormous visual appeal and immediacy.

The dominance that this kind of work held in the spectrum of painting in northern India was shattered by the arrival of a political force which was to change Indian culture forever. Led by Bābur (1483–1530), the Mughals made a series of thrusts from Kabul into India, culminating in their crushing defeat of the forces of Ibrāhīm Lodī, ruler of the largest of the Muslim kingdoms, near Delhi in 1526. Bābur's subsequent victory over an alliance of Rajput kings encouraged him to press ever deeper into the Gangetic Valley, and to establish a permanent presence in India. Bābur sought to transform the area he controlled – which he considered inhospitable – with gardens and architecture styled after those in his Central Asian homeland. It is very likely that painting was also part of this infusion of Timurid culture. In his memoirs Bābur alludes to various ancestors' ability in writing and painting, and comments succinctly on the skill of a few professional Persian artists. These scattered observations testify to Bābur's awareness of painting as a mark of cultivation, but furnish no clue as to the amount or nature of painting sponsored by Bābur himself.

Far more certain are the changes ushered into India during the reign of Bābur's son and successor, Humāyūn. Upon suffering a series of defeats at the hands of Shēr Shāh Sūr, an Afghan ruler who established a rival kingdom in northern India, Humāyūn was forced to take refuge at the court of the Safawid ruler Shāh Ṭahmāsp in Persia in 1543–44. Humāyūn's interest in art must have been whetted as he beheld the magnificent illustrated books produced by Shāh Ṭahmāsp's atelier, the largest and most accomplished in the Islamic world at the time. By good fortune, Ṭahmāsp's lifelong patronage of painting had begun to flag, and he agreed to allow two younger members of the atelier, Mīr Sayyid 'Alī and 'Abd al-Ṣamad, to accompany Humāyūn on his return to India. Humāyūn took advantage of the death of Shēr Shāh in 1545 and the fractious condition of his opponents to regain his empire about 1554, but died soon afterward in an accidental fall down the steps of his library. Both Humāyūn and his son Akbar encouraged the newly acquired artists to establish a painting workshop on the scale of the Safawid model.

The handful of paintings attributed to either Mīr Sayyid 'Alī or 'Abd al-Ṣamad in Persia provide a clear idea of the artistic heritage brought to India by the Persian masters. In one of these, a scene of the bustle of activities in a schoolyard, Mīr Sayyid 'Alī uses a patchwork of brilliantly colored areas to organize the composition in a manner typical of Persian painting (fig. 2). Together with the elaborate patterns of tiles, carpets, and mats, this geometric framework discourages any attempt to read the painting as a single, spatially unified entity. Instead, it invites the viewer to meander among the painting's many discrete passages, pausing to dwell on the exquisite detail and the abstract beauty of color and line in each. The figures, who appear first as yet another set of colored shapes, also contribute to the compartmentalization of the

scene by their arrangement in simple pairs or in small groups united by glance and gesture. Through his witty observation of the foibles of human behavior, Mīr Sayyid 'Alī breathed new life into the well-established types of Persian painting, and encouraged viewers to delight in anecdotes such as the preparation of paper, the copying of lessons, or the punishment of a wayward pupil.

Mīr Sayyid 'Alī and 'Abd al-Ṣamad fostered in the fledgling Mughal atelier many elements of Safawid art. Foremost among these was an appreciation of fine draftsmanship and meticulous application of colors, qualities often absent from the more roughly executed paintings of the Indian tradition. Standard Persian compositions were adapted for the ubiquitous courtyard, audience, and battle scenes. The Persian architectural construction of tall decorative screens enclosing a shallow hexagonal space was altered only slightly in Mughal depictions of buildings. Similarly, the Safawid formula of rendering landscapes as a series of overlapping pastel-colored, fan-shaped zones culminating in a high horizon became the foundation of nearly all early Mughal landscape scenes. Such stock Persian figures as willowy, beardless youths, heavily bearded elders, and lithe females, all depicted in typical three-quarter view, were also easily transplanted into painting produced in the emerging Mughal empire.

Yet practically from its very inception, Mughal painting incorporated some overtly Indian elements as well. A few local features had appeared in Persianate manuscripts illustrated under the auspices of Muslim rulers in Mandu, Bengal, and the Deccan from the late fifteenth century on, but generally these had been limited to slight differences in the palette, the occasional misunderstandings of Persian conventions, and the use of Indian conventions in the depiction of some women.

Indigenous Indian elements became far more pronounced in Mughal painting. Local features began to intrude upon well-established visual conventions: Indian plants cropped up in Persianate fields and gardens, indigenous creatures were admitted to ranks of the pictorial animal kingdom, and dark-skinned figures, commonly associated with India, assumed a much broader range of roles.<sup>10</sup> The traditional Indian female type in profile view, present sporadically in Islamic painting in India for more than half a century, became more common, and was occasionally accompanied by male figures with the typically squat proportions and angular profiles of indigenous painting. No matter what their source, Mughal figures seem more animated than their Persian or Indian counterparts, an effect achieved primarily through a set of increasingly explicit and individualized facial expressions, and secondarily through ever more demonstrative poses and gestures. Mughal artists also were inclined to temper the Persian predilection for brilliant, pure hues with earthier tones and rudimentary modeling. Artists trained in local Indian traditions occasionally reverted to old habits of distributing hot colors in large flat patches uninterrupted by the minute patterns in which Persian-trained artists characteristically reveled.



13.

The handmaiden's plea forces the prince to be brought to the place of execution a second time. By Gujarātī. *Tūṭīnāma*. ca. 1570. Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. A. Dean Perry, 62.279, f. 59b. 10.3 × 10 cm.

Into this inevitable amalgam of neighboring cultures, which occurred in court customs as well as in the imperial atelier, a wholly foreign element was introduced. As early as the 1560s, European emissaries and missionaries brought to India as curiosities and religious propaganda examples of European prints, which made their way into the hands of imperial artists and began to inspire a modest suggestion of the effect of light on form, a notion completely alien to both the Persian and Indian traditions. By the end of the sixteenth century, a number of Mughal artists had absorbed some European conventions for the rendering of volume and pictorial depth, and had conveyed the usefulness of such devices to some of their fellow artists. Shortly after the beginning of the seventeenth century, other Mughal painters had even begun to adopt elements of European symbolic vocabulary. Nevertheless, European art remained a minor component of Mughal art because it was a fundamentally deracinated style. Imitated rather than practiced, it could not compete with the continuous stream of artists from Persia and the regions surrounding the Mughal capital who shaped the course of painting produced at the imperial atelier.

The application of rudimentary modeling to faces and the contours of garments in Mughal painting lends Mughal figures a decidedly more physical quality than their somewhat ethereal counterparts in Persian painting. The very familiarity of these conventions of modeling, which are drawn from the Western artistic tradition, has led many Western scholars to see in Mughal painting a naturalism rooted firmly in objective reality, which marked a radical departure from the Persian tradition in both form and spirit. This new vision is widely attributed directly to the influence of the vigorous Akbar, only thirteen years old upon his accession to the throne in 1556. Indeed, most accounts of Mughal painting have focused squarely on the emperor's dynamic, inquisitive personality as the driving force behind its formal innovations, a view whose shortcomings will be made apparent throughout this study.

The initial fusion of Persian, Indian, and European art seems to have occurred in a remarkably short period of time, approximately 1560–65. A single manuscript, the *Tūṭīnāma* (Tales of a Parrot) now in the Cleveland Museum of Art, was long held to be the key to the critical formative stage of Mughal painting (fig. 3).<sup>11</sup> Some of its 218 illustrations are rendered in a fully realized Mughal style, while others show only a few elements of the new Mughal style combined with the earlier indigenous traditions. Thus, the variety of styles in the *Tūṭīnāma* appeared to demonstrate the process of assimilating painters with different artistic backgrounds into the imperial atelier.

This analysis of the *Tūṭīnāma* has recently been undermined, however, by the discovery that nearly two-thirds of the illustrations in the *Tūṭīnāma* are painted over an incomplete layer of paintings in the Sultanate or Candāyana tradition.<sup>12</sup> Examination of the manuscript under infra-red light has revealed that some artists retained the composition and other features of the underlying Sultanate paintings and reworked only the faces and costumes. In Figure 3, for example, the artist retained the two-tiered composition together with