



The Painters in the Mughal Atelier

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Abstract:

This article presents a case study of the Mughal atelier and its artists between the early sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This century presents the genesis, early development and formation of the Mughal atelier and the style of the Mughal miniatures. It corresponds with the reigns of three Mughal emperors – Humayun, Akbar and Jahangir. This paper aims to study the significant painters who worked for these Mughal emperors and what were the working conditions for them to work in the Mughal studio.

Keywords: Painters, Mughal atelier, Mughal Emperors, Mughal visual culture, Indian miniatures

The Mughal emperors were great patrons of the arts and devoted much of their resources to different forms of art. Architecture, painting, decorative arts, calligraphy, and other art forms received a great impetus under them. The Mughal Empire was established in India by Babur, who descended from Emperor Timur and Chatghai Turk and came from present-day Uzbekistan in 1526. He was a man of letters and had written his own memoirs. Among the artists, who find mention in the book of Babur – the *Baburnama* are the Persian masters Bihzad and Shah Muzaffar. Babur's stay in India was, however, short-lived and we find no mention of the establishment of an atelier during his brief reign 1526–30 CE.

Babur was succeeded by his son Humayun in 1530, who like his father was a refined bibliophile to the extent that he on occasions, would take his favourite volumes into the battlefield.¹ He was deeply interested in the sciences, particularly astronomy and astrology, and was also an amateur poet.² Humayun however, faced periods of political unrest initially by his own brothers and later by an Afghan, Sher Shah Suri. Accompanied by his wife Hamida Banu Begum and a few of his loyalists, Humayun took refuge in the court of the Safavid Persian ruler, Shah Tahmasp. It was at Shah Tahmasp's court that Humayun encountered the

magnificence of the Persian tradition of miniature paintings. Therefore, when he regained his control of India with the support of the Persian ruler, Humayun brought back with him a group of Persian painters who paved the foundation of the Mughal atelier initially in Kabul and then in Agra. The most important painters were Mir Sayyid Ali, Abd us Samad, Dust Muhammad, Mir Musavvir amongst others. They were skilled and already reputed in the field of painting. These painters played an instrumental role in the development of the Mughal style by initially conflating the elements of Persian, Chinese and indigenous Indian painting traditions. Later in the reign of Akbar European elements were infused, enriching the tradition further.

The painting studio, or Nigaar Khana, also known as Tasvir Khana was a part of Humayun's library. The dimensions and make-up of his workshop in India are not well known. Although it is speculated that he began the project of illustrating *Hamza Nama*, his son and successor Akbar continued it. Akbar was in his early teens when he became the Emperor of the Mughal Empire. Scholars believe that he was a dyslexic and therefore took a keen interest in paintings. The first major manuscript produced for him was the *Hamza Nama*, which had a series of 1400 paintings on cloth and may have been produced in either 12, 14 or 17 volumes. It was directed by two Iranian master artists, Mir Sayyed Ali and Khwaja Abd-as Samad. The work involved over a hundred artists, gilders and bookbinders, and to complete took fifteen years (from 1562 to 1577). Abul Fazl records, "clever painters made the most astonishing illustrations for no less than one thousand and four hundred passages of the story."³ The erudite minister further adds that "The *Chingiznámah*, the *Zafarnámah*, this book, the *Razmnámah*, the *Ramáyan*, the *Nal Daman*, the *Kalilah Damnah*, the '*Ayár Danish*, &c., were all illustrated. His Majesty himself sat for his likeness, and also ordered to have the likenesses taken of all the grandees of the realm. An immense album was thus formed: those that have passed away, have received a new life, and those who are still alive, have immortality promised them."⁴ The creation of these manuscripts required the labour of more than a hundred painters, calligraphers, gilders and book-binders. They recorded and documented significant historical events, personalities and interests of the emperor. The reception and viewership of these manuscripts were restricted to the royals and the elite of the court.

The extensive narrative passages, which span several hundred folios, required several miniatures to illustrate the text. Naturally, in order to finish these projects in the allotted time, numerous artists were needed, most of whom worked together on the illustrations. As was customary in the studio, the senior artist created the compositions (*tarh*), while the junior artist coloured the figures (*'amal*); on rare occasions, though, certain painters made a single contribution to these texts.

According to Abul Fazl more than a hundred painters had become the master painters in Akbar's atelier. He further provides details of some of the frontrunners in this regard as:

“1. Mir Sayyid 'Ali of Tabriz: He learned the art from his father. From the time of his introduction at Court, the ray of royal favour has shown upon him. He has made himself famous in his art, and has met with much success.

2. Khajah Abduss Samad, styled *Shirin qalam*, or sweet pen. He comes from Shiraz. Though he had learnt the art before he was made a grandee of the Court, his perfection was mainly due to the wonderful effect of a look of His Majesty, which caused him to turn from that which is form to that which is spirit. From the instruction they received, the Khajah's pupils became masters.

3. Daswant'h: He is the son of a palkee-bearer. He devoted his whole life to the art, and used, from love to his profession, to draw and paint figures even on walls. One day the eye of His Majesty fell on him; his talent was discovered, and he himself handed over to the Khajah. In a short time he surpassed all painters, and became the first master of the age. Unfortunately the light of his talents was dimmed by the shadow of madness; he committed suicide. He has left many master-pieces.

4. Basawan. In back grounding, drawing of features, distribution of colours, portrait painting, and several other branches, he is most excellent, so much so, that many critics prefer him to Daswant'h.

The following painters have likewise attained fame: Kesu, Lal, Mukund, Mushkin, Farrukh the Qalmaq (Calmuck), Madhu, Jagan, Mohesh, Khemkaran, Tara, Sanwlah, Haribans, Ram. It would take me too long to describe the excellencies of each. My intention is 'to pluck a flower from every meadow, an ear from every sheaf.'"⁵

Although Abul Fazl has named only a few of the Mughal painters, Mughal art historians have brought to light the names and oeuvre of several other significant painters who had contributed to the manuscripts and miniatures produced for the Mughal emperor Akbar.⁶ He worked closely with the painters, oversaw their work, and assessed it. According to the records, the artists were compensated for their work with bonuses and raises in salary. They were retained in the atelier purely on merit.

Several Mughal painters, who did not meet the Mughal parameters of quality, also took up employment at the sub-imperial regional courts, the respective rulers built their personal ateliers on the lines of the Mughal studio. This disseminated the Mughal style and several regional painting styles of Rajput, Central India and the Hills came into existence. The Mughal painters were given great prestigious positions in their ateliers.

This gradual movement of artists to subsidiary court accelerated with the beginning of Jahangir's reign in 1605 CE. He retained the most talented artists in his studio after he became Emperor. They were mainly the ones who particularly gained his favour when he was a Prince and rebelled against his father. The rest were being

dismissed from the royal service. The number of painters were greatly reduced and scholars believe that he only kept a meagre number of thirty artists in the royal atelier.

Jahangir as Prince Salim from an early age had his own small atelier.⁷ When in 1585 Salim was married to Man Bai and was given the *tuman tug* (the flag of highest dignity)⁸ and was also possibly allowed his own atelier by Akbar. The exact date of its establishment is not known, but it can be speculated from an indirect reference in *Tuzuk*, indicating that it was started when Salim was still a prince and that Aqa Riza Herati was appointed its director later. Aqa Riza-Murid –i-Padishah Salim was a Persian artist trained in the best Herati tradition, who immigrated to India in the late 1580s. He was an acquaintance /friend to Farrukh Beg in Mirza Hakim's atelier in Kabul and possibly came with/ followed him to Lahore.⁹ The father of Abul Hasan who was known to be a *khanazad* (born in Mughal patronage period), Aqa Riza must have been already in Salim's employment by the time of his son's birth in 1588-89. Aqa Riza name is not present in *Ainiakbari* and *Akbarnama*. It seems, therefore, that when he arrived from Persia he directly entered Salim's studio. His reasons for not joining the royal atelier will probably remain unanswered. Though his first dated work is from 1599, when he painted a margin painting (present in the Gulshan album) in Agra.¹⁰

Aqa Riza remained a significant figure in Jahangir's atelier as well. The studio produced smaller, higher-quality works created by a single master artist, in contrast to Akbar's atelier, where works were produced in large quantities. The creation of albums was prioritised over lengthy historical and narrative works. Gold was used extensively to illuminate the paintings' margins, which were adorned with flora, fauna, and frequently poised human figures deeply engrossed in their respective activities. The lavish court scenes, aristocracy, royal personalities, character traits, and distinctiveness of flora and fauna overtook the war scenes, portraits, narratives, and storytelling that were typical of Akbar's style. This exclusiveness and richness of Jahangir's paintings are considered the golden period for Mughal miniatures. Names of his painters like Abdul Hassan, Manohar, Govardhan, Mansur, Payag, Bishan Das, Balchand, etc are immortalised with the several exquisite miniatures they produced for the Mughal Emperor Jahangir.

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³ *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, Blochmann and Phillott, Vol. I, 108.

⁴ *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, Blochmann and Phillott, Vol. I, 108–109.

⁵ *Ā'in-i Akbarī*, Blochmann and Phillott, Vol. I, 107–108.

⁶ Cleveland Beach, Eberhard Fischer, B. N. Goswamy, *Masters of Indian Painting, 1100–1650* (Zurich, Switzerland: *Artibus Asiae* Publishers, 2011).

⁷ For a discussion on the style of their illustrations produced for Prince Salim at Allahabad, see John Seyller, "The Walters Art Museum Diwan of Amir Hasan Dihlawi and Salim's Atelier at Allahabad," in *Arts of Mughal India: Studies in Honour of Robert Skelton*, eds. Rosemary Crill, Susan Stronge, Andrew Topsfield (London: Victoria & Albert Museum; Ahmedabad: Mapin Publications, 2004), 95–110. Asok Kumar Das, *Mughal Painting During Jahangir's Time* (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1978), 4, 40–42, 56, 61. Asok Kumar Das, "Salim's Taswikhana," in *Allahabad - Where The Rivers Meet*, ed. Neelum Saran Gour, 56–71 (Mumbai: Marg Publications), Vol. 61, No.1, (September 2009); Linda York Leach, *Mughal and Other Indian Paintings From the Chester Beatty Library*, Vol. I (London: Scorpion Cavendish, 1995), 189–232.

⁸ Beni Prasad, *History of Jahangir* (London, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras: Oxford University Press, 1922), 34.

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¹⁰ Som Prakash Verma, *Mughal Painters and Their Work: A Biographical Survey and Comprehensive Catalogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 64.

