

# A NOTE ON EARLY MUGHAL PAINTING

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What is commonly known as the Mughal Imperial dynasty of India, was in fact presided over by Chughtai Turk rulers of Central Asian origin. They were called by European traders, for example, as Mughals (Mogors), perhaps due to their matrimonial relations with their political rivals, Mongols. The term, miniature similarly is a misnomer and just 'painting' is proper: these are simply portfolio paintings. The same style and technique was employed in cloth and wall painting.

Diverse painting movements were on during the pre-Mughal times, the 'Sultanate' period of our history in eastern, central and western India. These tried to synthesize the local Indian painting style with the Persian. Yet these were sporadic instances and failed to create an established 'School'. On the Indian side mainly the 'proto Rajasthani' school (rarely also West Indian School) interacted with the Persian painting elements. Thus a stage was set for emergence of Mughal painting under the able leadership of Akbar the Great (1556-1605).

Just prior to Akbar, the 'proto-Rajasthani' painting was taking strides, e.g. the 'Caurapañcāśikā' group of paintings. The costume and architectural details, as gleaned from the specimens, help us in understanding the Indian genesis of the Mughal school. Not only the youthful Emperor was struck with Indian artistic and cultural traditions, but evolved a new philosophy and aesthetics for creation and enjoyment of painting as has been recorded in his chronicler, Ab'ul Fazl's statements. The Emperor had a predilection for traditional Indian painting and painters. This is borne out by the lively presence of the 'Caurapañcāśikā' painting traditions in the early Akbari atelier, though supervised by two master painters of Persian origin, was dominated by traditional Indian painters who left an indelible mark on the nascent painting style at least in certain specific areas like the profile faces, transparent drapery, ornamental trees, water or sky treatment. This must have flowed from the Emperor's personal involvement in evolving and nurturing the painting style, even against the will of above mentioned Persian masters (the superintendents) Mir Syed Ali and Kwaja Abdussamad's vision, whom Akbar's father had recruited out of the Persian Imperial court of Shah Tahmasp at Tehran. The heavily Indian influence on Akbari painting style explained in depth by Ab'ul Fazl in his A'in-e-Akbari reading between the lines, it is Akbar's manifesto on his court painting, as he dwells upon concept and character of the style and in two instances of Daswant the master painter and Basawan, rated second only to Daswant, distinguishes individual qualities of the painters. Organisation of the atelier from the recruitment stage on, is also pointed out. Briefly, it also refers to the excellence achieved in the technical skills in painting production. Each of these corresponds to the characteristics known



from the actual examples. Besides, fortunately the Imperial clerks have left significant information as marginal notes, even the name(s) of the painter-artist and his specific and respective contribution, like conceptualization, development of the scene as assistant to the master-painter, colouration and finally delineation of principal faces, including portraiture, for art of portraiture attained an unprecedented perfection in this period to be followed up in succeeding generations.

Large size cloth paintings illustrating the Hamza Nama episodes were produced at the Imperial command, all 1400 out of which some 160 are known to us. It is already in an established painting tradition, draws inspiration from the local painting traditions of Mir Syed Ali and Khwaja Abussamad and from 'proto-Rajasthani' paintings, both in spirit and form. The scenes are imbued with adventurous and fast moving story teller, projecting spirited people and bold representation of nature. Men and women 'breath' (*sa-śvāsa* of the Indian painting tradition).

For some time the profusely illustrated copy of *Tuti Nama* (mainly in the collection of Cleaveland Museum of Art) was considered the earliest of the Akbari painting where diverse streams of painting appeared simultaneously in a 'melting pot' type of stage. This was doubted as the passages showing the Akbari school represent a later stage of its development. Now the later date of the *Tuti-Nama* leaves is established, beyond doubt.



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