

Painting Workshops in Mughal India

The painting workshop at the imperial Mughal court in the 16th century was more complex in organization than any atelier that India had ever seen. Most earlier Muslim courts in India had enlisted the services of one or two Persian émigrés and a few locals who struggled to imitate the style of their masters. Most indigenous Indian courts, both before and after the heyday of the Mughal empire, had their painting needs satisfied by a family or two of local artists. The tremendous resources of the Mughal empire allowed its painting workshop to draw upon a much larger pool of talent, including Persian artists in search of new patrons, and Indian artists from the many regions that had recently come under Mughal control. The Mughal workshop started out large and grew rapidly, so that a very heterogeneous group of about fifty artists in 1565 had by 1600 reached the unheard of scale of about 130 painters. As might be expected in a land where hereditary occupations are prevalent, family ties figured prominently in this recruitment, with sons following their fathers into imperial service. The sheer number of artists enlisted and the complexity of coordinating their tasks were beyond the capacity of traditional familial hierarchies, and so the Mughal workshop quickly developed a bureaucracy to ensure that this accumulation of talent could be harnessed to work together in a fruitful and efficient manner.

Once a text was selected and suitable paper was made, sized, and burnished, and the written surface was marked with discreet guidelines and preliminary rulings, a calligrapher was summoned to write out that text. The nature and sequence of these activities can be discerned from a close physical examination of some manuscripts, and several processes are depicted in the margins of a well-known page from the Jahangir Album attributed here to Madhava.¹ Since many favorite texts were copied repeatedly, the calligrapher could often refer to an existing manuscript of that text in his patron's library. This measure of dependence upon the library is one reason why those involved in the making and illustrating of books normally operated in or near the library, where they would also occasionally be called upon to refurbish damaged or incomplete holdings.

Calligraphers, who trained for years as apprentices under the masters of their day, approached their tasks with tremendous care. Relatively few manuscripts bear signs of correction of accidentally omitted or repeated phrases or of inadvertent lapses in the even spacing of words within a given line of text. This level of perfection was achieved at a truly painstaking pace, with one of the most highly esteemed calligraphers completing in a single day no more than seventeen lines of the text of Nizami's *Khamsa*.²

Contemporary literary references and valuations of manuscripts make it clear that calligraphers enjoyed the greatest prestige within the Mughal *kitabkhana* (literally, "book-house"). Nonetheless, in manuscripts intended to be decorated with illustrations, they often tailored their work to painters' concerns. Before many illustrations, for example, the calligrapher was compelled to write out several lines – sometimes as much as an entire page – of text in oblique configurations. This decorative device stretched out the text so that the painting would have an attractive and sufficiently large physical presence on the page and

would simultaneously appear immediately below the relevant passage of text. It is very unlikely that the number and subjects of illustrations were the prerogative of the calligrapher himself; rather, these overarching decisions, which affect the putative visual program and ultimate quality of the book, were probably made by a project supervisor, perhaps in consultation with the patron, well before the calligrapher took up his pen.

Despite the careful coordination of text passage and intended image, it appears that painters rarely took their cue from the wording of the actual text. Instead, the subjects of their illustrations were dictated by supervisors in the form of oral instructions or written ones inscribed either at the bottom of the folio or within the area to be painted. The content of these prescriptive notes ranges from a few words, such as the notes scrawled at the bottom of a double-page composition in the 1596–1597 Beatty *Akbarnama*,³ “a picture of the victory over the fort of Chitor” and “two pages are to be done,”⁴ to the relatively complete description of a scene of Iskandar meeting Dara at Mosul: “From two directions the armies array, wait anxiously, and make a compact.”⁵ Such a succinct synopsis of the text simplified the artist’s task of knowing what to paint, a handy thing for painters who might not be able to pick out the relevant narrative details from the subtleties of the Persian text, especially in poetry, or who might even be unable to read the Persian language at all. Mughal artists then decided how to give pictorial expression to these types of subjects, most often resorting to compositional formulas that they or their peers had developed for similar subjects in other manuscripts. So, for example, when the painter Ahmad needed to show Akbar at the siege of the fortress of Chitor,⁶ he could draw upon earlier depictions of the siege of any fort, whether Chitor itself or nearby Ranthambor. In this case, he actually combined the two, retaining the tent compound in the lower corner and breached walls from the former, and Akbar’s active role on the ramparts from the latter.

For most kinds of 16th-century Mughal manuscripts, the task of producing these miniatures was given over to various teams of painters, with one painter, usually a senior artist, being charged with the design, and another, usually somewhat less experienced or talented, asked to finish up the image by coloring in the forms. Assorted unfinished paintings help us to understand the distinction between the two phases of painting. In one representative example depicting Akbar receiving Prince Salim, the composition is fully worked out, and the faces of all of the figures have been sketched in, a detail so essential that one face has been covered over with white paint and replaced with an improved likeness.⁷ A second artist working downward from the top of the painting has only begun to lay in the colors for the largest areas in the background, such as the pavilion, canopy, and distant landscape. From this point, he would proceed to render individual figures, first doing their clothing and finally their faces and surface ornaments, with little or no guidance from his senior partner. Often the elder painter would step in towards the end to paint the faces of a few of the major figures, in this case certainly those of the emperor and his son. In very rare instances the role of providing special portraits was given to yet a third artist. This bi- or tripartite division of labor is documented sporadically in both informal and formal ascriptions written below the manuscript illustration and can often be detected in works in which there is an obvious shift in style. This inscriptional and visual evidence runs counter to some scholars’ claims that artists might specialize in details as limited as landscape elements or decorative patterns, and that as many as four or five individuals might routinely participate in a single work. While a few artists did come to be associated with a given genre, such as Husayn Naqqash with illuminations

or Mansur with animal painting, most artists shifted readily from one kind of work to another, so that at one time or another landscapes, architectural passages, figures, and floral and geometric border decorations all fell within their purview.

Surprisingly, Mughal painters labored under considerable time constraints. Some supervisors' notes specify the number of days that artists should spend on an individual miniature, and others indicate the date by which the painting should be completed. These directives had a profound impact on an artist's imagination and workmanship. For example, the painting *As washermen tend to clothes, their donkey listens to a fox* belongs to a fable book illustrated about 1595, one of the most cursory manuscripts produced in the imperial Mughal atelier.⁸ A note in the lower left of the painting field orders the artist Jagana to have the painting ready in "5 or 5 1/2 days by the 14th of the month of Azar." So even before Jagana took up his brush, he knew that he had to work quickly and efficiently. Accordingly, he limited the scene to a pair of washermen too busy to take heed of the fox about to lure their donkey to his death. The figures and animals are drawn simply, and the landscape is nothing more than a series of lightly colored washes. Now compare an illustration done by this same artist, Jagannatha,⁹ for a poetical text, the 1595 British Library *Khamsa* of Nizami, one of the most luxurious manuscripts ever produced by the Mughals.¹⁰ In this painting we see what Jagannatha was capable of doing when he had ample time and money. Most obvious is the dramatic increase in the number of figures in the composition. The inclusion of the many servants buzzing around the princess, and the guards conversing before a series of gates is a stylistic choice, not a requirement of the story, which needs only to show a princess painting her self-portrait. The setting, too, is far more elaborate, from the frieze of warriors adorning the outermost wall, to the numerous buildings sprouting up around the courtyard, to the magnificent carpet on which the princess is seated. But even individual forms are treated differently. The facial features are finer, the patterns of clothing more intricately detailed, the colors far richer. Most remarkable of all is the fact that this same elevated level of pictorial complexity and technical finish runs throughout this copy of the *Khamsa*, transcending the work of any particular artist. That this pattern of homogenization recurs at some level – high, ordinary, or even low – in virtually every manuscript of the period is an unmistakable sign that the imperial Mughal workshop had developed supervisory mechanisms to ensure that a given project would present a consistent look or quality in every one of its constituent parts. To understand Jagana as an artist, then, we must consider both kinds of his work, simple and lavish alike, as well as something of the general conditions under which the paintings were made.

Hence, in the Mughal workshop of the late 16th century an artist was regularly told the subject he was to depict, the collaborator with whom he was to work, and the amount of time in which he was to bring his creation to completion. In this seemingly constrained operation what room was there for the individual artist to develop his own visual ideas or habits?

Although the thousands of manuscript illustrations made by the scores of painters active during this period do show some formal variety, the stylistic differences among them are far more subtle than one might expect from a group so large and potentially diverse in background. Indeed, the calculated and overriding stylistic coherence of the Mughal workshop is easily contrasted with the stylistic heterogeneity of their modern counterparts, the artists tapped to contribute to the Karkhana Project,¹¹ whose artistic training is, if anything, more uniform in nature. Yet within the confines of a common formal vocabulary most Mughal artists did develop a set of distinctive idiosyncrasies, which they applied throughout their

work. These distinguishing traits rarely rise above the level of such minor details as a penchant for certain types of faces, a preference for particular colors and degrees of tonal contrast, or a predisposition for formal devices drawn from European art.

Scholars often learn to associate these subtle distinguishing details with individual artists and subsequently venture attributions for many a painting. Although this kind of connoisseurship can be enticing, especially when it holds out the prospect of affording the modern viewer a personal – and thus more readily satisfying – account of the creative process in another time, it can all too easily obscure a larger issue, that is, whether the attribution of individual credit was a matter of any real significance in these historical collective undertakings. The regular presence of official ascriptions naming the two or three individual contributors to a given Mughal manuscript illustration suggests that the identity of the individuals *did* matter. But to whom and to what end?

One possibility is that these ascriptions were a kind of work record for purposes of compensation, which, as Mughal court annals indicate, was issued in the form of monthly salaries with the occasional bonus. Yet this function is belied by the very prominence of these ascriptions, which are ordinarily written in a fine hand beneath the painting, sometimes alongside the formal description of the subject; if this information were no more than a mundane account of employment, it probably would have been recorded in a less conspicuous place, such as on a flyleaf at the back of the manuscript or in a separate logbook. A more likely possibility is that this unprecedented record of artistic contributions is both an expression of a Mughal inclination toward systems and part of an increasingly widespread pattern of acknowledgment of the work of individual painters in Muslim courts throughout South and West Asia from the late 16th century.

Despite the apparent increase in painters' prestige, there is no evidence that what modern critics would call a painter's personal artistic vision ever factored in the commissioning or evaluation of a Mughal work of art at the end of the 16th century. Ascriptions naming an artist are found rarely on independent paintings, that is, those intended to stand apart from the context of a manuscript. Similarly, nearly contemporary inspection notes written on the reverse of these paintings inevitably mention the subject of the painting but never the name of the artist. Finally, extant examples of contemporary numeral evaluations of paintings have been shown to be tied to workmanship and visual complexity rather than to the reputation of one artist or another.¹² And although seventeen individual painters are singled out by name in Akbar's court annals, they are lauded repetitively and almost exclusively for the marvelous fastidiousness of their work, which is never extolled as an expression of their own distinctive creative temperaments.¹³ Thus, while individual painting styles and talents were probably recognized within the community of artists employed in the workshop, they had little significance in the collective undertaking, and would not have been picked out from the final product like so many individual strands in a tapestry. What mattered instead was the imagery and finesse of the final product, for only if an object were perceived to be free of the imprint of another individual's spirit could it reflect the patron to his best advantage.

While the exceptionally deep documentation of the imperial Mughal atelier at the end of Akbar's reign makes it a comprehensive model of workshop processes, other Mughal workshops followed that model in only the broadest of outlines. The painting workshop maintained contemporaneously by Prince Salim at Allahabad, for example, commanded a roster of artists

a fifth as large as that of its imperial counterpart. Ascriptions appear less frequently below the illustrations of the manuscripts produced there – a trend possibly exaggerated by accident of preservation – but are supplanted by some artists' signatures on the paintings themselves. Only on exceedingly rare occasions is there evidence of the collaboration of two or more artists on a single work, and never is there a trace of a supervisor's directive or deadline.

This pared-down structure took hold of the royal atelier, too, when Salim ascended to the Mughal throne and adopted the regnal name of Jahangir (r. 1605–1627). The corps of imperial painters was reduced drastically, apparently to no more than a couple of dozen artists. Illustrated manuscripts generally lost their primacy, ceding that favored position to albums filled with exquisite specimens of calligraphy and independent paintings usually ascribed to individual masters. Together with Jahangir's boastful claims of his own connoisseurship of painting, purportedly honed to the level that he could discern the work of different artists in various parts of a single painted face, this tendency underscores a general shift away from collectively produced paintings and toward individualized efforts.

Meanwhile, still other Mughal painting workshops continued to operate along more traditional lines. Akbar's mother, Hamida Banu Begam (d. 1604), kept both a small library and painting studio of her own. The evidence for these has come to light only recently, but the two illustrated manuscripts that can thus far be associated reliably with her attest to a workshop limited to about six painters, only one of whom is documented by name in the manuscripts.¹⁴ In many illustrations a key figure or two is rendered in a conspicuously more refined manner, a phenomenon that points to a master artist both overseeing and intervening in the work of his colleagues.

A contemporary biography of 'Abd al-Rahim (1556–1626), the highest ranking noble at the courts of Akbar and Jahangir, sheds light on another well-established Mughal library and workshop.¹⁵ The financial and personnel matters of the library, which had some ninety-five employees, were overseen by a supervisor (*nazim*), who rose to this position by virtue of his manifold skills in poetry, calligraphy, painting, and other arts of the book. Below this rank was a deputy librarian (*darogha*), who managed the staff of calligraphers, painters, and bookbinders. Despite their subordinate place in this hierarchy, a few artists became the personal confidants of their patron, a status that the biographer cites in order to extol 'Abd al-Rahim's uplifting effect on his retainers, but that he also admits led to some jealousy within workshop ranks. Ascriptions and signatures on the illustrated manuscripts and independent paintings produced by this atelier yield the names of twenty-one painters, all of whom worked single-handedly. If this lack of collaboration is one sign of a loose workshop structure; another is the unexpected duration of some projects – at least seven years for a wholly original manuscript and fourteen for the refurbishment of one collected piecemeal. Such occasionally extended production times almost certainly included some hiatuses, which, given the relatively stable roster of artists in this atelier, probably reflected the distraction of a patron buffeted by sudden changes in political fortune.

As these examples demonstrate, the most elaborately developed painting workshops in Mughal India were essentially hothouse creations. They thrived when personal inclination and social circumstance combined to motivate a patron with ample resources to call together and sustain a group of talented painters, and collapsed when that sponsor died or lost interest for some reason.¹⁶ The striking exception to this trend is the imperial Mughal workshop, an institution whose sheer size and official status enabled it to weather Akbar's death and

to adapt to the new aesthetic values being advanced by Jahangir. In most other cases, however, a painting workshop simply dissolved upon the demise of its patron. Its members scattered across India in search of employment, almost never finding new situations as ambitious or cohesive. Some artists were absorbed into short-lived commercial workshops that turned out mostly humdrum imitations of styles that had long since passed from fashion at the Mughal court. Others made their way to the new ateliers being set up at regional courts in Rajasthan or the Panjab Hills, where they served as catalysts for new chapters in the history of Indian painting.

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- 1 Folio from the Jahangir Album with border scenes depicting six artisans of the library making books. Attributed here to Madhava (in other transliteration systems this name could appear as Madhu). Mughal, c. 1610. 42.2 × 26.5 cm. Freer Gallery of Art, F1954.116 recto. See Atil 1978, pl. 63; Seyller 2005, fig. 1.
- 2 See Seyller 1987, 258, n. 55.
- 3 *Akbar shoots Jaimal during the siege of Chitor*. Ascribed to Ahmad. Mughal, 1597. Painting 24.3 × 13.2 cm. *Akbarnama*, Chester Beatty Library, Ms. 3, f. 133b. See Seyller 2005, fig. 2.
- 4 The Persian inscriptions read: *taswir-i fath-i qal'a-i-chitor* and *do safha guzashta ast*. Both halves of the double-page composition are discussed but not illustrated in Leach 1995, vol. 1, nos. 2.119–120.
- 5 *Iskandar meets Dara at Mosul*. Ascribed to Makara. Mughal, c. 1598. Painting 17.9 × 15 cm. *Sharafnama*, School of Oriental and African Studies, Ms. 24952, f. 27b. The Persian inscription reads: *az do taraf lashkar arastan wa intizar sulh dashtan*. See Minissale 1998, fig. 2; Seyller 2005, fig. 3.
- 6 See n. 3 above.
- 7 *Akbar receives Prince Salim*. Mughal, c. 1595–1600. 20 × 12.6 cm. Musée Guimet, MA 1026. See Okada 1989, no. 37; Seyller 2005, fig. 4.
- 8 *As washermen tend to clothes, their donkey listens to a fox*. Ascribed to Jagana. Mughal, c. 1598. Painting 13.3 × 9.6 cm. Folio from a dispersed *'Iyar-i Danish*. Chester Beatty Library, Ms. 4, no. 52. See Seyller 1987, fig. 16; Seyller 2005, fig. 5.
- 9 Jagannatha is the formal version of the name Jagana (in other transliteration systems this name could appear as Jagannath / Jagan).
- 10 *The princess paints a self-portrait*. Ascribed to Jagannatha. Mughal, 1595. Painting 23.8 × 14.6 cm. *Khamsa* of Nizami, British Library, Or. 12208, f. 206a. See Brend 1995, fig. 25; Seyller 2005, fig. 6.
- 11 The Karkhana Project was a project by six innovative contemporary Pakistani miniaturists, resulting in a series of collaboratively produced paintings (see www.greencardamom.net/exhibitions/exhibitions_page.php?id=5 and www.aldrichart.org/exhibitions/past/karkhana.php).
- 12 See Seyller 2000.
- 13 For an explication of this often-cited passage from the *A'in-i Akbari*, see Seyller 2001b, 30–31.
- 14 These manuscripts, a dispersed *Ramayana* dated 1594 and a *Dvadasa Bhava* of about the same date, are presented respectively in Black and Saidi 2000, no. 44, and Fantoni 1999, no. 19. Leach (2004) has associated with Hamida Banu the dispersed *Akbarnama* that has recently appeared on the London art market. This association, based almost exclusively on the hypothetical prominence of women in its surviving illustrations and the unsupported assumption that a female patron would automatically be exceptionally interested in such scenes, is rejected here.
- 15 For a more complete account of 'Abd al-Rahim and his library establishment, see Seyller 1999, 45–63.
- 16 Simpson (1993) arrives at similar conclusions in her discussion of painting workshops in 16th-century Iran.