CHAPTER VI
AKBAR AND
THE POWER OF
IMAGES

He [God] knows the visible and the unseen.
He is the Mighty One, the Merciful, who excelled
in the making of all things. He first created man
from clay, then bred his offspring from a drop of
paltry fluid. He moulded him and breathed into
him of His Spirit.
(KORAN 32:6-9)

The idea of human creativity in the Islamic
world has to be seen in the light of God's original act
of creation. The princely patron of the arts was always
aware that God was the only true creator of forms, and
the only one who could instil life into those forms. It
is not surprising, therefore, that in sixteenth-century
India theoretical discussion of the arts centered on
how forms were able to transmit meaning rather than
on artistic creativity itself. Few patrons were as in-
terested as Akbar in the functioning of signs and the
communication of ideas. In 1579-80 he even went so
far as to establish a "House of the Dumb" (gang
mahal) just outside Fatehpur-Sikri in order to see
what language children would acquire if they were
totally isolated from all speech, with a staff of dumb
nurses. After three or four years the children
were discovered to be as functionally dumb as their
nurses. Fortunately, Akbar's involvement with the
visual arts was far more successful.

The best understanding of how Akbar thought im-
ages could, and should, function is found in the writ-
ings of Abul Fazl, who developed a highly poetic
explanation of how ideas are communicated. In a
wonderful passage from the Akbarnama, Abul Fazl
related that when Akbar commissioned him to write
the history of his reign, "Wings came to my soul, and
strength to my tongue, and in an admirable manner
brought the hidden things of the heart from the soul's
ocean to the shore of paper." Later, in the Ain-i
Akbarnia, Abul Fazl further embellished his metaphor.
The spoken word, he wrote, "steps forward on man's
tongue, and enters, with the assistance of the convey-
ing air, into the windows of the ears of others. It then
drops the burden of its concrete component, and re-
turns, as a single ray, to its old place, the realm of
thought." But occasionally, he continued, an idea takes
"a different direction by means of man's fingers, and
having passed along the continent of the pen and
crossed the ocean of the ink, alights on the pleasant
expansion of the page, and returns through the eye of the
reader to its wondrous habitation."

Under Akbar's enthusiastic and free-ranging pa-
tronage the same metaphor was valid for artistic cre-
ation in all the media, as the "ocean of ink" was trans-
formed into a more profound reservoir of techniques,
colors, and forms. The political and cultural goals that
motivated Akbar in his patronage of the arts have been
discussed in earlier chapters. What remains to be de-
defined is the nature of the conventions that guided
Akbar's artistic aspirations from the "realm of
thought" to the reality of the finished product, and the
philosophical issues that helped shape his interests.

Safely ensconced in his new City of Victory, Akbar
personally participated in a wide range of artistic activ-
ity, trying his hand at everything from quarrying stone
and playing the kettle drum to determining which

Room with Stone Screens on the North Facade of "Jahangir's Palace"
scenes should be illustrated in the various manuscripts under production in his *kitab alhumra*. Such all-round virtuosity inevitably led Abul Fazl to compare Akbar, in his remarkably long list of epithets at the beginning of the *Ain-i Akbari*, to the legendary Iranian king Jamshid, who is traditionally credited with introducing the crafts to mankind. Although such comparisons are a common literary device, Akbar's activities at Fatehpur-Sikri certainly confirm the aptness of the link with Jamshid. It might even be suggested that a magnificent figure of a gold-clad Jamshid in a miniature painted by Abd as-Samad in 1584 was intended as an ideal representation of Akbar, a visual parallel to Abul Fazl's written praise. Ironically, the only area of the arts in which no expertise was claimed for Akbar was calligraphy, the Islamic prince's art par excellence. It may thus be no coincidence that calligraphy was the art form that changed the least at Akbar's court.

Akbar's appreciation of art was encouraged by the writings of Nasir ad-Din Tusi, whose *Akbir-i Nasi* was singled out for copying and illustration in the early 1560s. Of all the proclamations found in this text, the one perhaps quoted most often by Akbar in the company of his artists would have been the following admonition for the pursuit of excellence in craft, which was interpreted as encompassing everything from the act of kingship itself to the daily chores of the lowly street-sweeper: “All who are characterized by a trade should make advance and seek perfection therein, not showing contentment with an inferior degree or acquiescing in meanness of aspiration. It should be recognized that men have no finer ornament than an ample subsistence, and the best means of acquiring a subsistence lies in a craft.” This advice is well reflected in the quality of almost every object produced for Akbar, from luxurious illustrated manuscripts to the seals affixed on official documents.

Another passage in the *Akbir-i Nasi* talks about “Masters of Tongues” (*ilm ad al-adilla*), defined as those whose craft comprises the “sciences” of Scholastics, Jurisprudence, Elocution, Rhetoric, Poetry, and Calligraphy. It is at this very point in the above-mentioned manuscript of this text that Akbar boldly ordered the most detailed painting he have of his *kitab alhumra* (no. 19). As Akbar clearly intended this as a statement that not only his calligraphers but also his artists were “Masters of Tongues,” it must be asked by what means or signs did he think they were able to communicate and what it was that he wanted them to communicate. Such questions lead us into especially fascinating territory when they are applied to the new developments in painting that occurred during the Fatehpur-Sikri years.

Akbar's entire reign was characterized by the way in which the arts were rendered open to dramatic changes in matters of content and mode of representation. Even Abul Fazl regarded the dense and long-winded literary style he adopted in the *Akburnama* as something entirely new (and praiseworthy!) and sought to contrast positively his "new gilt" with the "fantastic embellishments" of other writers both past and present. It was at Fatehpur-Sikri, the new capital of his enlarged Indian empire, that Akbar began in earnest to mediate a permanent reconciliation between his Central Asian ancestry and the political, social, and geographical realities of India. The main reward for his daring initiatives was an overall stability in the empire that allowed for considerable refinement to be made in almost all areas of Mughal political and cultural life. Even though Akbar's stay at Fatehpur-Sikri is traditionally regarded as sadly truncated, by the standards of the Mughals themselves fourteen years must have seemed almost an eternity. Neither Babur nor Humayun ever had the luxury of that long a stay in any one place. Planned anew literally from the ground up, Fatehpur-Sikri afforded Akbar a perfect stage on which to act out his self-chosen role as the semi-divine emperor, the "Shadow of God on Earth." For Akbar this included both theoretical and practical leadership in the arts, and it was at Fatehpur-Sikri that Akbar's "ideas in this area crystallized into a coherent and consistent vision."

"The field of painting, the best preserved and documented of all the media utilized by Akbar's artisans, serves as the best model for a study of the exciting changes that took place in the visual arts under Akbar's patronage. The seeds for this new mode of painting had been sown in the early 1560s just before Akbar ascended the throne. At this stage paintings such as the St. Louis "Youth and Musician" (no. 5) the Fitzwilliam "Prince Hunting" (no. 7), and such portraits as that of Shah Abul-Malik by Dust Muhammad (no. 81) took the first tentative steps away from purely Safavid conventions that nevertheless remained an important element in Mughal painting (unlike Safavid culture in general which was never appreciated at Akbar's court). Even in the *Tarimag" begun ca. 1605, when Akbar was in his late teens (nos. 8, 9, 10), one immediately becomes aware of the deft combination of seemingly unrelated forms that characterise Akbari painting as being receptive to "foreign" elements (both Indian and European) without ever losing track of its own originality."

Illustrations from the *Hamsawama*—painted between 1562 and 1577 (nos. 11, 12)—fulfil the possibilities of a uniquely dynamic manner of painting
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Illustrations from the 1588 Dinara of Anvari and the 1597-98 "Dynasty of Seljuk" Khamsa of Nizami. In a different category, by 1602, three years before Akbar's death, the forty-one miniatures in the Juy Bashir (no. 30) show a quality of emotional depth and painterly finish that is both astonishing and profoundly moving.

Writing in the second half of the 1960s, Abul Fazl boasted that "His Majesty has looked deep into the matter of raw materials and set a high value on the quality of production," and that consequently "colouring has gained a new beauty... and finish a new clarity." 8 But refinement in technique does not alone explain the development of the mature Akbari aesthetic. While it has been astutely observed that "the rhythmic and coloristic violence of the Hama-cama is a formal expression of the struggle of Akbar's intellect against
the manifold problems of an empire in the making;" and conversely, the calmer, more delicate forms of the later pictures mirror Akbar's peace of mind which came with the increased security in the empire;"10 this interpretation still leaves certain interesting avenues unexplored. Could there be a more deep-seated philosophical basis for the development of the characteristic tendencies of Mughal painting during Akbar's reign, and how do they tie in with the Mughals' concepts of creativity, communication, and meaning? By the sixteenth century, Muslim thought in India was thoroughly permeated by the theory of tabiat al-wujud (literally, "the oneness of being"), a pantheistic belief in the unity of being formulated by the Spanish mystic Ibn al-Arabi (1164-1240) and later popularized by such famous poets as Jami (1444-92). According to Ibn al-Arabi this indivisible Reality can, however, be viewed from two different angles: "the Real," standing for God and the essence of all phenomena, and "the Many," standing for the phenomenal world of appearances. On the broadest level a distinction is thus set up between "inner meaning" or "exoteric content" (muqaddas) and "outer form" (waraat), in other words, between what might be termed the spiritual and material worlds. Ibn al-Arabi's favorite metaphor to stress that he was not proposing a theory of duality was that outer form represents a mirror-image or shadow of "the Real" beyond.11

This theory of tabiat al-wujud, supported by liberal thinkers such as Abul Fazl and his brother Fazii but bitterly opposed by more orthodox courtiers such as Badauni, had a number of important political and cultural ramifications for Akbar's India. On the one hand, the closedness of this world view to Hindu monoism had already played a key role in opening up a dialogue between Muslim and Hindu mystics in pre-Mughal India, a process Akbar chose to continue and expand in such forums as the House of Worship at Fatehpur-Sikri. On the other hand, Abul Fazl was extremely fond of using this metaphysical vocabulary, which was frequently employed rhetorically in the Persian literary tradition,12 when attempting to describe Akbar's universal power and authority. Standard allusions, reminiscent of Ibn al-Arabi's original metaphor, to emperors as the "Shadow of God on Earth" were in fact so frequent that Fazii felt it appropriate to re-amplify Akbar's supposedly divine origins in the following undated verse: "Although kings are the shadow of God on earth, he [Akbar] is the emanation of God's light. How then can we call him a shadow?"13

In his discussion of calligraphy and painting in the Ain-i Akbari, Abul Fazl interprets the dichotomy between the spiritual or inner world (muqaddas) and the material or external world (waraat) in a much more specific manner, and uses it as the very backbone of his argument. Initially he takes care to identify Akbar as an emperor particularly interested in this metaphysical distinction as it applies to the perception of visual objects, describing him at one point as the "Depicter of the External and Reveal of the Internal,"14 and later on as the "Perceiver of the Links between the Visible and Invisible Worlds."15 Although the parallel with the opening line of the Koranic verses quoted at the beginning of this chapter is striking, Abul Fazl has gone beyond the bounds of mere eulogy and has, in fact, pinpointed the reasons for Akbar's great interest in painting. Art provided Akbar with a unique opportunity to combine the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure with an investigation into the nature of the universe. As Abul Fazl clearly states, "His Majesty, from his earliest youth, has shown a great predilection for this art, and gives it every encouragement, as he looks upon it as a means, both of study and amusement."16 Observation of nature and the production of images were thought to go hand in hand towards providing a fuller understanding of the world at large, and Abul Fazl implies that this realization was one of the key factors behind the heightened interest in the arts that is so apparent at Akbar's court. This addition of a metaphysical component to the art of painting led Abul Fazl to write that, "It is indeed amazing that from a cultivation of the habit of observing (tarjumah) and making of images (tanhlah arz) which is by itself a source of indolence - came the elixir of wisdom and a cure for the incurable sickness of ignorance, and those many haters of painting who blindly followed their predecessors had their eyes opened to Reality."17 Under Akbar's patronage outer form and inner meaning become the two poles for criticism of painting, and we are assured by Abul Fazl that the emperor was an excellent judge of both.18 Outer form had to be depicted in such a way as to lead the viewer to the inner, esoteric meaning. The desirability of this relationship is further expressed on the walls of the palace at Fatehpur-Sikri popularly known as the Sanadah Makan or "Maryam's House":

The garden of its pictures is in the color of [just like] the garden of paradise... In elegance it is like the gilded vault of the firmament. In grace it is like the turquoise-colored place of the firmament...

Its beautifully drawn paintings are a meaning-displayed
the manifold problems of an empire in the making—" and "excessively the calmer, more delicate forms of the latter pictures mirror Akbar's peace of mind which came with the increased security in the empire."19 This interpretation still leaves certain interesting avenues unexplored. Could there be a more deep-seated philosophical basis for the development of the characteristic tendencies of Moghul painting during Akbar's reign, and how do they tie in with the Mughals' concepts of creativity, communication, and meaning?20

By the sixteenth century, Moghul thought in India was thoroughly permeated by the theory of *wqtat al-wujud* (literally, "the oneness of being"), a pantheistic belief in the unity of being formulated by the Spanish mystic Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240) and later popularized by such famous poets as Jami (1414-92). According to Ibn al-Arabi this indivisible Reality can, however, be viewed from two different angles: "the Real," standing for God and the essence of all phenomena, and "the Many," standing for the phenomenal world of appearances. On the broadest level a distinction is thus set up between "inner meaning" or "cosmic content" (*manzuf*) and "outer form" (*manzuf*),21 using rare forms might be termed the spiritual and material worlds. Ibn al-Arabi's favorite metaphor to stress that he was not proposing a theory of duality was that outer form represents a mirror-image or shadow of "the Real."22

This theory of *wqtat al-wujud* supported by liberal thinkers such as Abu Fazl and his brother Faziyi but bitterly opposed by more orthodox courtiers such as Badauni, had a number of important political and cultural ramifications for Akbar's India. On the one hand, the closeness of this view of the world to Hindu monism had already played a key role in opening up a dialogue between Muslim and Hindu mystics in pre-Mughal India, a process Akbar chose to continue and expand in such forums as the House of Worship at Fatehpur-Sikri. On the other hand, Abu Fazl was extremely fond of using this metaphysical vocabulary, which was frequently employed rhetorically in the Persian literary tradition,23 when attempting to describe Akbar's universal power and authority. Standart allusions, reminiscent of Ibn al-Arabi's original metaphor, to elements as the "Shadow of God on Earth" were in fact so frequent that Faziyi felt it appropriate to re-amplify Akbar's supposedly divine origins in the following unadulterated verse: "Although kings are the shadow of God on earth, he [Akbar] is the emanation of God's light. How then can we call him a shadow?"24

In his discussion of calligraphy and painting in the *Ain-i-Akbari, Abu Fazl expressly presents the dichotomy between the spiritual or inner world (*manzuf*) and the material or external world (*manzuf*) in a much more specific manner, and uses it as the very backbone of his argument. Initially he takes care to identify Akbar as an emperor particularly interested in this metaphysical distinction as it applies to the perception of visual objects, describing him at one point as the "Depicter of the External and Revealer of the Internal,"19 and later on as the "Perceiver of the Links between the Visible and Invisible Worlds."25 Although the parallel with the opening line of the Koranic verses quoted at the beginning of this chapter is striking, Abu Fazl has gone beyond the bounds of mere eulogy and has, in fact, pinpointed the reasons for Akbar's great interest in painting. Art provided Akbar with a unique opportunity to combine the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure with an investigation into the nature of the universe. As Abu Fazl clearly states, "His Majesty, from his earliest youth, has shown a great predilection for this art, and gives it every encouragement, as he looks upon it as a means, both of study and amusement."26

Observation of nature and the production of images were thought to go hand in hand towards providing a fuller understanding of the world at large, and Abu Fazl implies that this realization was one of the key factors behind the heightened interest in the arts that is so apparent at Akbar's court. This addition of a metaphysical component to the art of painting led Abu Fazl to write that, "It is indeed amazing that from a cultivation of the habit of observing [zarat bina] and making of images [ismahal arad]—which is by itself a source of ignorance—came the elixir of wisdom and a cure for the incurable sickness of ignorance, and those many masters of painting who blindly followed their predecessors had their eyes opened to Reality."27

Under Akbar's outer form and inner meaning become the two poles of the criticism of painting, and we are assured by Abu Fazl that the emperor was an excellent judge of both.28 Outer form had to be depicted in such a way as to lead the viewer to the inner, cosmic meaning—"the source of ignorance is further expressed on the walls of the palace at Fatehpur-Sikri popularly known as the *Suhuna Makan* or 'Maryam's House'."

The garden of its pictures is in the color of [just like the garden of paradise].

In elegance it is like the gilded vault of the firmament. Its grace is like the turquoise-colored place of the firmament.

In beautifully drawn paintings are a meaning-displayed form. Its meaning-displaying form is the ravisher of the heart of men of certainty.25

Such sentiments would have been firmly instilled in the artists of Akbar's *ziyadkhana*. According to Baydat, for example, an otherwise unknown painter by the name of Paykari ("the Follower") attained a degree of brilliance "by means of studying the outward form to hidden truths," and wrote a now lost poetic treatise on their relationship which began as follows:

*O Lord, I am unable to grasp hidden truth (manzuf)! Forgive me, for I am too much a worshipper of the outward form (manzuf) of thy grace, O most Pure God.* Bordering so fashioned the outward form of our earthly tabernacles
That every (fair) form which I see
Points but to me the way to the hidden truths of Thine Essence.*

What Akbar desired to create and codify was a new pictorial language in which ideas would be given a formal representation, or set of signs, as effective as the letter in the fields of writing, where Abu Fazl noted, "the written shape guides to letter and word and makes the content (manzuf) is found out."25 However, in order for painting to acquire the potent ability to communicate the subtleties of the world already vested in writing, new forms or signs had to be devised to better express the desired inner meanings. It is clear that painters who "blindly followed their predecessors" were of little interest to Akbar, just as Abu Fazl avowed that the emperor was not concerned with poems because "he attaches no weight to a handful of originality."26 New directions in painting had to be investigated and on this daring journey two exciting paths were open to Akbar: the first emphasized the observation of nature and drawing from life, while the second was concerned with the study of European painting techniques and came to Akbar's attention.

Part of the motivation behind taking up the challenge of the first path was succinctly stated by the Safavid artist Sadegh Beg in *The Canons of Painting*: "when there has already been a Mann and a Bihazf has been made it is necessary [except through the direct observation of Nature] could one break free of the crushing weight of past perfection?" But increased exposure to a wide range of new artistic styles seemed to challenge Akbar's belief in the "perfection" of Bihazf and other past masters of the Persian tradition, and opened up the possibility of setting his own standards of brilliance. The second path was made all the more enticing by the way in which European paintings and prints, and of which Akbar was aware by the 1730s at the latest, seemed to be able to represent the subtleties of nature so successfully. Abu Fazl recorded the reaction these works engendered upon their arrival at the Mughal court: "Although in general a picture represents a material form...the painters of France [Europe] quite often express, by using rare forms, our mirthful rates and [thus] they lead the ones who consider only the outside of things to the place of inner meaning."26 It is safe to assume here that Abu Fazl had in mind the highly experimental reception of European paintings and prints which brought to Fatehpur-Sikri by the Jesuit mission in 1580. But just as the detailed study of nature had great ramifications throughout Moghul painting and not only on the actual production of human portraits or animal studies, Akbar's interest in European works went far beyond the production of exact copies. Instead, foreign techniques were made subservient to the Moghul ideals being expressed and explored.27 Akbar directed a corps of well over one hundred artists along a path that eventually led to the achievements found in such later manuscripts as the *Ijaz Bahishti* (*no. 30*). The concept of what a painting should be was given a new theoretical foundation and an explicit set of goals. To meet this challenge, new formal and technical conventions were brought into currency. Realism combined with a highly charged emotional content brushed aside the dazzling surface brilliance of Safavid and Timurid paintings with an emphasis on the perfection of form. Even the old Safavid masters who had been brought to India by Humayun were encouraged to alter their manner of painting, and Abu Fazl wrote that although Abu samad "knew this art before joining the royal service, the transmitting glance (iskri-i bina) of the king [Akbar] has raised him to a more sublime level and his images have gained a depth of spirit." (literally, his outer forms turned their face to inner meaning).

Soon Abu Fazl was able to answer Sadegh Beg's challenge with the claim that "such excellent artists have assembled here in [Mughal India] that a fine match has been created to the world-renowned unique art of Bhizin and the magic making of the Europeans"28. Few would challenge his assertion that Akbar's bold experiments with new directions in painting were a great success.

In fact, claims were soon made to the effect that through the fine qualities of painting under Akbar "innate images appear to come alive" and that by the commissioning of state portraits "the dead have gained a new life, and the living an eternity."29 Remembering the Koranic proclamations, however,
about God being the only true creator, and fearing that the emperor's motives might be misunderstood, Abul Fazl hurried to quote a disclaimer concerning the role of the artist as creator made by Akbar during a private assembly one day: "I cannot tolerate those who make the slightest criticism of this art. It seems to me that a painter is better than most in gaining a knowledge of God. Each time he draws a living being he must draw each and every limb of it, but seeing that he cannot bring it to life must perform give thought to the miracle wrought by the Creator and thus obtain a knowledge of Him." Through this statement the emperor was able to deftly move aside any orthodox religious opposition to his infatuation with the visual arts.

Akbar demanded that equal attention be paid to both a subject's inner essence and its outer form. His determination that any given form should lead the viewer to a deeper, esoteric meaning is one of the main factors that makes Mughal painting from Akbar's reign so visually and emotionally satisfying. Some of these new powers of artistic expression had a decidedly practical use, allowing Akbar to gauge, for example, the true character of a courier through his portrait and also strengthened the didactic possibilities of painting. On a metaphysical level, the search for the inner essence behind a given outer form was ultimately seen to bring both patron and artist to a fuller awareness of the Divine, and the power of God the creator.

25b. Detail of Manuscript of the Gulistan of Sadi (1582-83).