Portraiture and nature

By the end of the sixteenth century, the three principal dynasties of Islamic culture—the Ottomans, the Safavids, and the Mughals—had all become interested in individual portraits of princes (see pp. 80, 82 and 188) and their entourage. Sometimes integrated into compositions of symbols (see p. 135) of European origin, these portraits are almost always stylized and allow little analysis of the subject shown. However, true individualization and a fine psychological rendering can be found in the portraits of painters, such as the touching image of Mir Sayid Ali (see p. 43), in the images of prisoners in chains (see pp. 62, 107), and simply in individuals observed by chance in towns and cities. Forming a genre somewhere between the portrait and the stock image is the series of representations of handsome young men, poets, artists or simply courtiers. They can be shown standing (fig. 80), seated (fig. 81) or embracing as couples (fig. 82). Their pink, rounded faces are almost identical and their clothing always the same. The asexual, indolent posture suggests a peaceful world of pleasure in which the personality of the individual disappears to be replaced by mystery and games of love. Obviously, there are exceptions. For example, a charming medallion attributed to Behzad (fig. 83) shows a wise old man and an elegant young man in conversation following a chance meeting in a typical landscape. We do not know what they are talking about and the surrounding text does not help to place the meeting. This means that the viewer is free to imagine their conversation and any invention is possible in this image, the form of which recalls the motifs of Italian painting of the same period, the delicate, composed elements of which lent themselves to all manner of interpretation.

In contrast to this elegant and refined painting is the portrait of the archer Noshir by Reza-i Abasi (fig. 84); the details—the sock and the Franciscan monk’s head on the pipe—suggest that this may be a satire on the opium-addicted military world that was no longer capable of combating the new threats weighing down upon Iran.

Whether individually created or inserted into larger compositions, the representations of men, far more than those of women, focus on the faces, rarely on the body and appear to present distinctions between figures that do not correspond to the reality of the period but which today largely elude us. The elegance of form and the wealth of detail in the gestures suggest a whole range of human relationships in which truth is perhaps less important than the wealth of possibilities offered.

The vast nature is represented can lend itself to a similar interpretation. Nature appears in almost every painting. Sometimes it may be little more than a strip of vegetation that serves as the basis of an illustrated event (fig. 85), but from the fourteenth century onwards, and partly under the influence of Chinese painting, the role played by nature grew, and landscape became a vital element of the composition. The Dari album in Berlin contains several examples of landscapes that dominate the page—a tall mountain in the Chinese style with tiny horsemen at its foot (fig. 86) and an inextricable tangle of branches around a pool or river—and that almost seem to belong to a late nineteenth-century European style of art (fig. 87). Other landscapes showing hunting and scenes of country life (figs. 88 and 89), and Mughals building a wall in the orders of Akbarshah (Akhbar the Great) in order to protect the civilised world from the barbarians (fig. 85), are depicted realistically in a simplified landscape of rocks and trees. Moreover, under the Mughals, we often find landscape painting that imitates Western art (see p. 141).
Generally, the representation of nature follows one of two distinct approaches. First, there is the uneven landscape where flat areas are accompanied by rocky ridges with curious details (see p. 95) that are sometimes even transformed into animals or figures (fig. 79). These ridges are often painted in a variety of colors by artists with boundless imagination. These color variations have sometimes been explained by the extraordinary transformation that soil and grass undergo in spring in north-east Iran and the Herat region of Afghanistan, where the best fifteenth- and sixteenth-century studios were located. But it seems far more likely that these colors were developed by the great painting studios and that they reflect the specialization of apprentices and of artists too who used them in emphasizing the range of their technical ability, rather than as a carefree observation of nature. The other type of landscape is the garden (figs. 91–96) with its pools and small streams, trees with abundant foliage and fruit and flowers always in bloom, day and night. Although more real than the abstract constructions of artificial rocks, this too was a representation of a nature that did not really exist, a dream of colors and plants in bloom. This dream in a sense paralleled and supported the rich attire and apparent life of pleasure of the men and women depicted there. However, such a conclusion can be no more than a hypothesis because, in contrast to the human body, which had not been studied as it had been in the West, the details of plants, flowers and rocks are often far more naturalistic than the overall style of the paintings in which they are found. As always, however, Moghul painting forms an exception in this respect.
FIG. 82: Young woman styling her hair

C. 1580 (Isfahan, Iran)

Painting by Said ibn (17–1608/09)

Paris, Louvre Museum, Inv. MA8199