SELECTED ARTISTS OF THE HAMZANAMA

John Seyller

Fig. 22
Attributed to Basavana (active circa 1755–58)
Safayya, who helped Tahmuriya search for Darab, tells her that all the slaves have been sold (detail)
See also cat. 8b, 19, 31, 32, 33, 35, 36, 68, 76, 78, 81, and 82.

Fig. 23
Attributed to Lalu (active circa 1765–86)
The old man cuts off the fruit of the Tree of Life, but drops dead (detail)
Mughal, circa 1765–70. Tutinama, Cleveland Museum of Art, 62.219.78a, b.
See also cat. 41.

Fig. 24
Attributed to Dasavanta
(Active circa 1765–84)
The parrot cautions her young on the danger of playing with foxes (detail)
Mughal, circa 1765–70. Tutinama, Cleveland Museum of Art, 62.219.31a, b.
See also cat. 25, 31, 36, 42, 44, 45, 47, 53, 54, 58, 59, 63, 64, 69, 71, 73, 78, 83, and 86.

Fig. 25
Attributed to Kesava Kalan (Kesava Dasa)
The water maiden’s husband, insane with jealousy because of her love for Mirzai, tears their children’s bodies apart in front of her (detail)

Fig. 26
Attributed to Kesava Dasa
(Active circa 1765–96)
Elephant and rider (detail)
Mughal, circa 1785. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, MAK 524.
See also cat. 29, 40, 53, 55, 56, 60, 61, 77, 78, and 85.
Fig. 27
Ascribed to Madhava Khurd
Darab unties Humayun’s bonds after he defeated Khusrau and his men (detail)
Mughal, circa 1557-80, Darabnama, British Library, Or. 4655, fol. 51a.
See also cat. 38, 40, 57, 59, 62, 72, and 73.

Fig. 28
Designed by Basavana, painted by Tara Kalam (active circa 1555-60)
Akbar watches a fight between two bands of sanyasis at Thanetwar, Ambola, Punjab (detail)
Mughal, circa 1580-87, Akbarnama, Victoria & Albert Museum, I.S.  41896
6v/17.
See also cat. 82, 83, and 85.

Fig. 29
Ascribed to Shrivana
(active circa 1565-1600)
Shapur returns to his house to find it ransacked (detail)
Mughal, circa 1577-80, Darabnama, British Library, Or. 4655, f.57a.
See also cat. 22, 26, 29, 43, 46, 49, 52, 65, 70, and 71.

Fig. 30
Ascribed to Mahesa
(active circa 1565-90)
Darab and his son watch one of the boats accompanying them being wrecked off the Arabian coast near Mt. Umar (detail)
Mughal, circa 1577-80, Darabnama, British Library, Or. 4655, f.56b.
See also cat. 22, 26, 29, 43, 46, 49, 52, 65, 70, and 71.
1. KRISHNA DEFEATS TRINAVARTA, THE WHIRLWIND DEMON

This striking painting belongs to the earliest known illustrated series of the Bhagavata Purana, a devotional text which celebrates the wondrous events of the life of Krishna, a popular incarnation of the god Vishnu. Here Krishna is shown defeating Trinavarta, one of many demons dispatched to kill him. Assuming the form of a violent whirlwind, Trinavarta sweeps the child Krishna up into his vortex even as he blinds all those around him with great gales of dust. But Krishna prevails, as he inevitably does, by choking the formless demon and smashing his lifeless body to the ground.

Krishna, whose youth and divinity are indicated by his short stature and blue color, is shown twice: once at the apex of the demonic funnel and again before his relieved mother, presumably in the aftermath of this cataclysmic struggle. The use of repeated figures to relate sequential events in a continuous narrative is a device found throughout this series and indigenous Indian painting generally.

The widely dispersed Bhagavata Purana series is regarded as a landmark of pre-Mughal Indian painting for the sheer number and variety of its illustrations. Its provenance and date are still a matter of some controversy, but most scholars agree that the series was made in northern India, perhaps in Rajasthan or the vicinity of Mathura, about 1530. Elements of the tradition it represents, the so-called Chaukaparchalas style, appear in several Hormoznond paintings, and thus establish the persistence of this general style in the 1560s. One of its principal characteristics is a highly compartmentalized composition, often organized primarily by schematic architectural and arboreal forms and arbitrary fields of color. The concern for overall design overshadows an interest in fine draftsmanship. Paint, while normally applied carefully, as in the elaborate patterns on the women’s skirts, is sometimes allowed to flow freely, a tendency seen vividly here in the vibrant strands of color in the whirlwind. Above all, it is the female figure type that lives on in early Mughal painting. The Indian aesthetic taste for images of women endowed with rhythmic gestures, voluptuous proportions, angular facial features, and a large, leaf-shaped eye apparently captured the fancy of a number of Mughal artists, for they happily introduce such sensuous local beauties into paintings with few other overtly Indian passages.

2. THE ASSASSINATION OF CHOSROES PARVEZ

Like so many others grown fond of power, the Sassanian king Chosroes Parvez loses sight of justice and drifts slowly into tyrannical behavior. Eventually, the supporters of Prince Shiruya depose him and place him under house arrest. They prevail upon Shiruya to dispatch him once and for all; Shiruya reluctantly pays off a thoroughly uncouth man, Mihir-Hurmuz, to carry out the reprehensible deed. The assassin catches Chosroes attended by a single page. The former king, trying to forestall his impending fate, orders the page to bring some articles to be used in prayer services, but the naive youth does exactly as he is told and returns without seeking out guards who could save his master. Chosroes solemnly says his prayers, all the time knowing that death is now inevitable. Once he has finished, the assassin leaps on him and steals the life from his body.

This work is the sole painting attributed to Abdul-Samad in the Shah Tahmasp Shahnama, the most ambitious and magnificent of all Safavid manuscripts. It embodies Abdul-Samad’s early style, of which the technical precision and somewhat formulaic nature were to undergo a marked change soon after he began to work for Humayun and Akbar. Here, for example, his figures are relatively expressionless, no matter whether they are gripped by sleep or an assassin’s hand. Similarly, for his architecture Abdul-Samad favors brilliant surface pattern over spatial definition; indeed, the only passages that lack intricate patterns are those that have been left unfinished, namely, the seven uninscribed blue panels over the doorway, window, and chambers, and the shockingly stark blue, green, and red forms behind the murderer and his victim. The open-faced, planar construction and densely patterned surfaces contrast with those of courtyards seen through-out the Hormoznond, which habitually have space-enclosing outer walls and gateways, occasional respite from patterns, and generally larger figures.

1. The attribution to Abdul-Samad is made by Welch (1972, p.184).
2. Mihir-Hurmuz’s face and arms also remain unfinished.
Amid the bustle of schoolboy activities, a schoolmaster beats a pupil for presuming to occupy his place during a temporary absence, a transgression implied by the verses written in the cartouches of the carpet on which the master sits. Such punishment must be routine, for only the adult standing behind the master casts an eye in its direction. The students busy themselves with their lessons and chores, which include boiling rags to make pulp, kneading it to make paper, dying and drying individual sheets, and burning a sized and trimmed folio. Elsewhere, a princely figure holds up an inscribed book: a pupil squats to wash his hands, and a muezzin calls the faithful to prayer from the rooftop.

Mir Sayyid Ali accommodates these varied but stock activities in a brilliantly compartmentalized composition. He uses complementary colors and patterns, for example, to balance the two equally sized portions of the courtyard, and a bifurcated landscape and tall plane tree to answer the colors and shapes of the formal architectural screen and dome.

This painting, thought by many scholars to be a detached page from a royal Safavid copy of the Khamsa of Nizami, has emerged as a key document in Mir Sayyid Ali's oeuvre. It not only bears the painter's signature, written in a minute hand on a sheet of paper held by a student dressed in purple, but also provides a virtual checklist of his most distinctive forms and devices. Among these are figures in whom the whites of the eyes are visible around tiny pupils, a pronounced taste for meticulously rendered patterns, and the appearance of thematically related verses on books and carpets.

1. The verses by the poet Hafiz are transliterated and translated by Melikian-Chirvani (1998, p.44): "You cannot rest excessively in the place of great ones / Unless you have prepared the paraphernalia of greatness / If you leave your lot in the Lord's care Hafiz / You shall often lead the good life with the good fortune given by the Lord." Very similar imagery occurs in a Bulharan manuscript of Shah WA Dervish of Hili dated AH 1272 (AD 1854-55) in the Keir Collection.

2. According to Melikian-Chirvani (1988, p.44), the inscription reads: "I saw a beauty to whom the master gave a pitcher [of wine] at a time of penury - He looked at her/His face and forgot what he had in his hands."


4. Though read and noted earlier, the signature was first published in Melikian-Chirvani (1998, p.40, and fig.10.

4. THE ANGEL OF DEATH ATTACKS SHADDAD AS HE DISMOUNTS IN THE GARDEN OF IRAM

Few series of paintings in the Islamic world can match the Hamzanama illustrations in sheer size. One prominent exception is a dispersed Hamzanama manuscript, the most sumptuous copy of a text allegedly composed by the Shih Imam of Far Qad-Sadiq and used for divinations. This manuscript was made for the Safavid ruler Shah Tahmusp shortly after 1550, just a few years before Akbar's painting workshop undertook the Hamzanama project. This Hamzanama is much smaller in scope—only about thirty paintings are known—but it is closely related to the Hamzanama in overall structure and figure scale. The book was organized so that a full-page painting was followed by a page of text describing the scene, a relationship between text and image reversed in the Hamzanama.

This scene, which appears in several later copies of the Hamzanama, depicts a demonic creature attacking King Shaddad. Unlike cats, this is not a demonstration of valor in the face of adversity, but of the ruinous consequences of hubris. Shaddad, it seems, became obsessed with the idea of creating a garden so splendid that it would rival paradise itself. Once this garden of iran is complete, Shaddad arrives on his horse and starts to dismantle. No sooner does he set one foot on the ground than God dispatches the angel of death to

smite him with a club, thereby exacting swift and fatal retribution for his vain and impudent challenge to divine supremacy in all matters. The painting illustrates this portentous subject with marvelous directness. Hurting through the air and seizing Shaddad by the throat is the angel of death, rendered here as a spotted devil-like creature, albeit without the customary horns, tails, and claws. He breathes fire, something no ordinary devil can do, and brandishes a club abased with the wrath of God. Behind him is the blasphemous garden, filled with treed laden with sweet tasting fruits and inhabited by wondrous half human birds. Shaddad, his mounted companions, and the figures taking refuge in the tower are all conceived as large-scale and absolutely flat forms, and are all variations of a distinctive facial type associated with Aqa Mirak, to whom this entire series has been attributed.

1. Milstein, Ruhmandz & Schmitz 1999, p.60. Barbara Schmitz believes that the manuscript was originally bound.

2. I am indebted to Karin Ruhmandz for information about the subject of this scene.

5 Bahram Gur Prepares for a Feast

This damaged copy of a classic Persian poetical text is one of the rarest works of all early Mughal painting. Although its colophon is missing, several features of the manuscript establish that it was made in Kabul, where Humayun set up court in November 1545, when he first wrested control of the city from his brother and rival, Kamran; notwithstanding a few temporary lapses in control, Humayun maintained Kabul as his base of power until November 1554, when he began the campaign to retake his former territories in India. The Khamsa's ten illustrations generally display an accomplished Persian style, although to judge from certain details of costume, one realized by several different artists. One illustration is ascribed to Mawlana Darvish Muhammad, a painter named by the chronicler Bayezid Bayat as one of a small coterie of artists in Humayun's service who were otherwise undocumented. Other illustrations—especially this one—may be associated plausibly with Mir Sayyid Ali, who, together with Abdul-Samad, began to work for Humayun soon after September 1545.

In two illustrations, an enthroned figure wears a conical hat with a square base, a distinctive type of headgear purportedly invented by Humayun. The first of these, the figure of Navvail in the painting on folio 172a, has been given the visage of Humayun, whose features and pointed beard are recognizable from a painting dated 960 (1553) in the Gulshan Album, the much-studied Princes of the House of Timur, and later dynastic portraits. The second is the figure of Bahram Gur shown here. Rather than appearing as a mature ruler, as he normally does, Bahram has a decidedly boyish face and body; in fact, the figure strongly resembles the young prince Akbar, who was born in 1542 and is portrayed in a very similar manner in the aforementioned Gulshan Album painting, when he would have been nine years old. Thus, it seems that two artists flattered their patron and his son by using the time-honored visual concept of incorporating their likenesses in illustrations of a literary text.

One specific feature of this painting suggests the hand of Mir Sayyid Ali. The carpet on which Bahram is seated is shown folded into quarters, and has verses, largely illegible but tentatively identified as the poet Hafiz, written in red in cartouches along its border. This device recurs in much of Mir Sayyid Ali's work, notably cat. 3 and 7.

1. This date is provided by Abu'l-Fazl, Akbar Nama, 1543, p. 252. Melikian-Chirvani (1998, p. 31) argues that these two artists were actually received by Humayun in Navvail in 1553 (September–October 1553). He asserts that this date must be more accurate because Bayezid claims to cite it from a letter sent by Humayun to the ruler of Kashghar and shown to him by Abdul-Samad in 1550–51. Canby (1908, n. 3), however, lends credence to the 1545 date by noting that Abdul-Samad was captured by Kamran for several months in AH 957 (AD 1550–51), but returned to Humayun by AH 958 (AD 1551).

This much is certain: a dark-skinned, bespectacled man wearing an Indian-style jodhp and turban holds a scroll with a long inscription; this petition mentions the aged Mir Musawwir. Alludes to his son (Mir Sayyid Ali) and addresses His Majesty. Beyond this, a lively controversy breaks out with some scholars accepting the identification of the sitter as Mir Musawwir and asserting that the artist is his son, and others forging new interpretations that contend that either Mir Musawwir is portraying himself or a third party presenting his petition. As will be seen, the determination of the precise circumstances under which this painting was made affords our understanding of painting during the reign of Humayun.

So proficient a painter was Mir Musawwir that Humayun was happy to solicit his services, offering to send Tahir Mas, the great sum of a thousand tumans if he would release the artist. Humayun could reasonably expect a positive response, for as the Safavid chronicler Bada‘i Munsiri-i Qazwini wrote, the painter was already in disgrace. Bada‘i then follows up with this statement: It is thus that the Mir’s son, who had become better than his father, went earlier to India, and the father followed him there. In this light, the contents of the scroll’s inscription become perfectly intelligible.

Petition from the old and long time slave, Mir Musawwir: it is a great honour to report that it has been a while since this slave’s son (i.e. Mir Sayyid Ali) has entered the services of Your Majesty. It is hoped that he will become the subject of munificence [as for me], I am hopeful to start my journey soon and join Your Majesty’s services. God willing, the shadow of your radiance [shall protect us forever].

Because Mir Musawwir acknowledges that Mir Sayyid Ali had joined Humayun some time earlier, the pictorial petition must postdate late 1549 by at least several years; because the artist addresses Humayun, it must postdate January 1556 by at least a few months. Therefore, there is some evidence that Mir Musawwir did, in fact, work briefly for Humayun's Melkian-Chirvan's recent alternative interpretation of the painting as a self-portrait of Mir Musawwir fails on several points. First, the subject's dark skin is a conventional indication of an Indian identity, and was not used for persons of Iranian birth. Second, it does not explain why the figure wears Indian dress and how the curling scroll shows signs of exposure to European art — something, by Melkian’s own account, was not known in Iran or Kabul at the time — if Mir Musawwir were yet to reach Humayun’s court, as the inscription clearly states. The most likely scenario, therefore, is that Mir Sayyid Ali, whose name is inscribed in the lower margin, composed the text of this address on his father’s behalf. Being a clever artist, he then incorporated this written petition into a skillful yet humble visual one, perhaps even arranging for the painting to be delivered to Humayun by the very advisor depicted therein. This scenario also means that the painting retreats in date from the 1560s, when the Humayunama project was well under way, to the final year of Humayun’s reign, when the redigging of Mughal atelier was still being organized and its production was limited to a handful of paintings.

1. The extensive publication history of this painting is reviewed critically by Melkian-Chirvani (1998, pp. 39–40, and in, n. 31–34), and Soudavar (1999, pp. 50–53, and n. 18–25). I had not absorbed these new arguments at the time my own recent publication of this painting (Seyller 2000) went to press.

2. A Shah Tahmasp Shahnama illustration (f. 516b) signed by Mir Musawwir and dated AH 934 (AO 1527–28) is reproduced in Welch (1972, p. 169).


5. Welch attributes to Mir Musawwir two paintings in the Lillesh Collection (Khurasan of Nizam, which, by most scholars’ reckoning, is the only known manuscript other than the Bibliothèque nationale Khurasan of Nizam (cat. 5) to have been made for Humayun; Chandra 1978, pp. 89–90).

Ascribed to Lala
India, Mughal dynasty,
circa 1550–1600
12 x 6.4 cm.
Musée des arts asiatiques-
Guimet, Paris, cat. 519, 1C
Published: Verma 1958, fig. 13;
Okada 1989, no. 44; Stchoukine
1929, no. 51.

6B A SCHOLAR WRITING

The compiler of this album page wittily juxtaposed the older image of an aged petitioner (cat.6A) with this portly scholar. The former leans forward self-sincerely and holds a scroll addressed to a superior, while the latter, a self-contained mound of a man, hunches over a weighty tome and takes up his pen for his own satisfaction. Apart from presenting a contrast in character, the two paintings demonstrate the fundamental change that Mughal painting underwent in the second half of the sixteenth century. Mr Sayyid Ali’s elegant petitioner remains essentially a flattened form, an effect accentuated by the supplicant’s implausibly torqued pose, solidly colored jamal, and smooth contours, as well as by his isolation against an abstract ground. By comparison, Lala, whose whole name is inscribed in the lower border, dwells upon his scholar’s sheer bulk. The artist envelops his figure’s broad body with a heavy fur-lined cloak rendered with a halting line, a streaky wash, and a real interest in texture, and encircles his three-dimensional hands and feet with generous sleeves and folds. Once he extended the figure’s general amplitude with two plump, lightly tinted bolsters, Lala’s interest seems to have flagged. For the setting, he musters only two sketchy segments of a carpet border, a slender tree daubed with undefined blossoms, and the faint suggestion of an arching hill.

Lala, an accomplished and prolific artist, often resorts to this half-colored manner, which was particularly in vogue in the 1550s. His figure style is easily recognized in the scholar’s narrow eyes, knotted brow, and taut facial lines, which combine to lend many of his characters a somewhat weary and distracted expression even when it is not entirely appropriate to their station or action. By contrast, the figure’s remarkably full hands and feet are hardly kept with this artist’s work. Although Mughal artists occasionally applied light washes of white paint to correct or refine their forms as they worked, it is quite possible that the whitened passages on the hands and feet are signs that these darkly outlined features were enhanced when the painting was mounted long after it was made. It seems that at this time, too, some other parts of the painting—notably the lines along the scholar’s left shoulder, the lower edge of the book, and the bottom of the sash—were strengthened, and the lines of the robe were carried into the right margin.

7 SELF-PORTRAIT

This exquisitely painted portrait is a landmark of early Mughal painting. Its youthful subject initially seems ordinary, for sixteenth-century Iranian painting abounds with such images. Its importance stems from the information supplied by two formal inscriptions placed in the composition. Lying between a scroll and a pen and inkwell, implements that collectively suggest that the figure had done the writing himself, is a tablet inscribed above: ‘At the top of the writing tablet, it is written in gold: “The master’s tyranny is better than the father’s kindness.”’ The inscription below reads: ‘Sayyid Ali, the son of the realm of Humayun Shah, painted this. By virtue of its location and phrasing, this second inscription must be understood as a signature, still an exceedingly rare indication of authorship at this point in the history of Iranian painting.’ Moreover, the epithet Mir Sayyid Ali uses implies that Humayun was the reigning emperor. The logical inference, therefore, is that Mir Sayyid Ali completed the painting for Humayun before that ill-fated ruler fell to his death on 28 January 1556. To judge by the sitter’s Indian dress and the style of the painting, which displays greater figural volume and more spatially advanced setting than works executed at Kabul in the early 1550s (for example, cat.5), this portrait was probably done not long after Humayun and his artists had reached Delhi in August.5 In short, it serves as the benchmark for Mughal painting on the eve of Akbar’s ascension and the inception of the Tughlaq project.6 While most authors have taken the subject to be generic, one has recently proposed that this painting is actually a second self-portrait of Mir Sayyid Ali,7 an interpretation supported by the probable meaning of the first inscription, which plausibly alludes to the artist’s training by his father, Mir Musawwir.

1. Melikian-Chirvani 1988, pp. 36–37. This reading varies significantly from that offered by Martin in Dickson & Welch 1981, 1, pp. 190–91: ‘On the frontispiece of his mind he has written, “Better a forceful master than a father over kind.”’
2. It omits the title Mir, which would never be used when referring to oneself.
3. In his generally convincing argument for this date, Melikian-Chirvani (1988, p.8) cites the European-inspired form of the scroll, which, he believes, was never known in Kabul.
4. Due to an editorial oversight, a painting in the Bellak Collection was erroneously attributed to Mir Sayyid Ali in Mason 2001, no.13.

Signed by Sayyid Ali
India, Mughal dynasty,
1555–60
Painting 19.1 x 10.5 cm.
Ink 10 x 6 cm.
Los Angeles County
Museum of Art,
Bequest of Edwin Binney, 3rd,
M.90.1.111

Published: Melikian-Chirvani
1958, fig. 1; Figgood 1993, fig. 6; Pal
1993, no. 42; Okada 1992, fig. 69;
Welch 1990, fig. 83; Brand
& Lowry 1985, no. 6; Dickson
& Welch 1981, fig. 24; Welch 1979,
no. 74; Chandra 1976, pp. 61–64;
Welch 1973, no. 51; Birney 1973,
no. 10; Grube 1968, no. 90.
8a SEATED SCHOLAR

In both theme and form, this image of a middle-aged scholar seated pensively before a book and complementing the scene of astrologers mounted beside it (cat. 8b), a man again stands at a table, apparently now without any of the urgent expectation that it will yield simple answers to immediate predicaments. The assent toward making their way in this world, too, but perhaps a little more pondering over the philosopher’s shoulders, he does so with utter schematics.

8b PRINCE AND ASTROLOGERS

What does the future hold for us? As prince and paper alike have pondered this age-old question, they have often enlisted the aid of astrologers, who assure their clients that their individual fates can be discerned in the alignment and movement of the celestial bodies. European travelers attest that the practice of consulting astrologers to glimpse the future was widely popular in Mughal India. At the royal level, this observation is borne out in most illustrated historical manuscripts, for almost every scene celebrating the birth of a royal scion includes a passage in which astrologers chart his horoscope.

This drawing depicts a young prince seeking answers to more immediate quandaries. Seated in a palatial chamber festooned with heavy swags and attended by a page, a sword-bearer, two attendants, and a pet monkey, the plumed figure waits intently for the leader of the motley troupe of astrologers to make his prediction. This venerable soothsayer surely will not disappoint. Having gathered some arcane charts and instruments—a scroll presumably containing lists of cryptic omens, an inkwell, a pen, and an hourglass—he now points with gravity at a rotating ring dangling from a short chain. A young assistant consults a book, probably a copy of the Diwan of Hafiz or the Koran, while a more senior colleague becomes so anxious that he raises not one, but four fingers to his mouth.

A fragmentary attribution to Basavana in the lower right corner confirms an attribution of this compelling scene to Basavana, the most perceptive student of human nature in all of sixteenth-century Indian painting. The prince and his puckered-mouthed pages are less strongly characterized than we normally expect of Basavana, perhaps because the artist recognized that their tender age and lost profiles made for too clean a slate for his usual humanizing traits. By contrast, his assorted soothsayers could hardly be quicker or more interesting in countenance. Whatever their expression, all the figures are rendered with marvelous volume, achieved largely by means of soft contours and carefully observed texture and shading.

Despite these many fine features, this drawing was rated as second class in quality, as indicated by the numeral 2 written below the central figure and again directly above the inscription. The anonymous evaluator singled out the chained monkey as still less accomplished, and inscribed a number 3 (third class) immediately beside it.

Ascribed to Mir Sayyid Ali
India, Mughal dynasty,
circa 1560–65
14.9 x 11.7 cm.
Musée des arts asiatiques
Guimet, Paris EO 3577 B

Published: Seyller 2000, fig. 91; Meikian-Chinnavi 1998, fig. 77; Okada 1992, fig. 70; Okada 1989, no. 27; Zebrowski 1983, no. 18.

Ascribed to Basavana
India, Mughal dynasty,
circa 1585–90
14.9 x 11.7 cm.
Musée des arts asiatiques
Guimet, Paris EO 3577 A

Published: Meikian-Chinnavi 1998, fig. 7 (deta. 3); Okada 1989, no. 29.