The subject of this dramatic painting is an elusive one, for neither the text that precedes this illustration nor its caption has survived. The following text is also of little use in this regard. It begins with a brief account of Zumurrud Shah’s disputed retreat to Mushtanisar, one that takes him through the dangerous Zarangā Valley, where he meets up with an old ally, Ta’us Shah. A great ambush eventually ensues, and Qahir Qahramān—another of Zumurrud Shah’s trusted confederates—is killed. All this is witnessed by Umar, who, in the concluding lines, hastens back to Hamza to tell him the news. Thus, there is no textual indication whatsoever that the figure shown dispatching this demoness is Hamza. Moreover, although the hero sports three plumes in his turban, signifying his high station in life, he is much too young and active to be Hamza, who is normally depicted as bearded and stately.

Whatever his identity, the stout hero is making short work of the vile creature who has ventured out of a darkened cave in the center of a rocky landscape. She is dressed in ordinary woman’s clothing, which clings enough at the bodice to reveal a sagging breast, a standard trait of heroines and witches. Her predatory and savage nature is also conveyed by her tangled, wild hair. More overtly demonic are her flaming eyes, bony nose, bared teeth, and spiky tongue. Yet it is her hairy, wolfish ears that are featured most prominently, one being adorned with a tiny golden earring and the other, now somewhat abraded, being seized by her resolute opponent. The bloody slash mark across her back signals that she has already landed one devastating blow. Now, having yanked the demoness’s head toward him, he raises his sword high and prepares to deliver the mortal strike to her neck. Seven unarmed onlookers scattered around the scene watch this spectacle with amazement.

This painting is surely by Kesava Dasa, one of the most eminent artists in the Mughal atelier. Signature features of his work are everywhere. Most obvious is the face of the demoness herself, which shows the same explicit expressiveness that Kesava uses for all his antagonists (see cat. 57). Her dress, heavily modeled with broad, painterly strokes and edged with an undulating black line, also recalls Umar’s cloak in the aforementioned painting. The rocks are again flattened and smooth, with dark contour lines binding their irregular oval shapes. Even the trees are familiar, both for their straight, lisse trunks and precise, vibrant foliage. So is the ground itself, divided abruptly into a dark foreground marked with greyish tufts, and a light, nearly plain middle zone.

By far the most distinctive feature of this painting is the sky. Most contemporary Mughal paintings limit the sky to the uppermost fifth of the composition, and render it as an expanse of blue streaked with white or gold, a convention adapted from European painting. Here, however, in the knotted, low-hanging, flame-like clouds the artist has invoked a tradition with roots in Islamic painting as old as the fifteenth century, and an origin as distant as China. He is not content to superimpose this motif on an otherwise plain sky; instead, he uses it in concert with an extremely rocky ground, so that the electrifying energy of the clouds reverberates in the darkest and most jagged portions of the blue sky.
SHAHRASHOB ABDUCTS HAMZA, WHOSE COMPANIONS SEARCH FOR HIM IN TAKAW

This story is set in Sabayil, a city recently captured by Hamza and the place where he, Qasim, Badruzzaman, and Landhau are all to be married. Some of the infidel inhabitants of Sabayil turn outlaw, including the spy Shahrashob, who sneaks back into the city in disguise and meets up with an opportunistic money changer named Mazhub. Shahrashob abducts Hamza by the shore, stows him heavily fettered in a boat, and flees to the east.

Umar comes across Hamza's horse, Asgard, grazing in a spot where there is evidence of foul play. Seeing Mazhub lingering nearby, Umar accuses him of complicity in Hamza's disappearance, a charge Mazhub vociferously denies. The resourceful Umar has ways of extracting the truth; however, and frightens one of Mazhub's slaves into revealing that Shahrashob kidnapped Hamza, and that Mazhub, along with some roughnecks aptly named Nimrod, Lughayh Chain-Chewer, and Shart b. Beast-Chain, was indeed a willing accomplice. Umar orders Mazhub hanged for his deceit, hastily outfits a boat, and with Yazak the Cathayan sets sail in pursuit of Shahrashob and his captive.

Meanwhile, a different boat – manned by Hamza's brother Ayij and son Almamshah, and Tul Mast – is sailing toward Sabayil. Despite the best efforts of the sailor Yunos, the boat is blown thoroughly off course, finally landing at Takaw, where Malik Arghus rules and Hamza's archenemy, Zumurrud Shah, is rumored to be afoot. Once the companions are in the town, Yunos makes his way to a caravanserai and asks for a room. The innkeeper, one Baba Junayd, begins to turn him away for want of space, but changes his mind when Yunos confides to him that his friends seek of money, and those who accommodate them will surely be perfumed by it. The travelers take a room over the gate, and Tul asks the proprietor to store some goods for a while. Next they need a money changer, and are introduced to Khwaja Nu'man, a merchant who by chance has helped Hamza before and is known to Almamshah. He reveals his identity to Almamshah in private. Soon afterward, he shares his good news with Baba Junayd, who has his own complicated reasons to be gladened by the presence of the Iranian heroes.

While waiting for news of Hamza, Ayij, Almamshah, and Tul Mast go in disguise to see Mahalaj, a much-heralded champion, perform feats of great skill for Malik Arghus, the king of Takaw. He changes a camel weighed down with heavy bags of sand, impales it with his spear, and flings it over his shoulder. Next Mahalaj strikes a huge plane tree with such force that the tip of his spear passes completely through it and splits it. Another champion shows off his extraordinary facility with the bow, and like Mahalaj, boastfully calls out for someone to try to match him. Almamshah steps forward. Not only does he have the strength to draw the bow, he casually fires three arrows clean through the massive tree; then he breaks the bow in his hands and contemptuously casts it aside. Not to be outdone, Ayij strollls over to the tree and extracts the spear with one mighty hoove. He smashes the lance against the colossal rock with such force that it sinks into the ground with the spear embedded in it. At the sight of these astounding feats, a wave of admiration ripples among the crowd but the presence of these formidable but unknown champions alarms Zumurrud Shah.
DURING HAMZA’S WEDDING TO THE DAUGHTER OF HIS FRIEND PRINCE UNUG, HAMZA IS ABducted BY SHAHRASHOB AND STOWED IN A BOAT

The first extant illustration of the eleventh volume of the Homzana has come to us without the benefit of the text that immediately precedes the painting, but the narrative on the first text page of the volume, the damaged caption, and the text on the reverse together provide a more than adequate account of the events that unfold in this scene: the kidnapping of Hamza by the infidel spy Shahrashob and his removal to the enemy kingdom of Takaw by boat.

Nearly half the painting is occupied by a large boat launched by two straining oarsmen. At its midsection, and indeed, the center of the composition, is a figure dressed in a brilliant yellow jama and a glowing plumed turban, his left arm resting on an enormous red sack. By position and color, he is clearly the linchpin of the trio of armed men, and he alone actively gestures toward the shore. There, the largest and most brightly garbed of three men answers his beckon, while the flanking figures tend to a horse and camp paraphernalia.

In the context of the episode described in the caption, the key figures can be readily identified: Shahrashob bids farewell to his accomplice Madhur as he steals away in his boat, and his bundled cargo is none other than Hamza. Finally, the dappled stallion pawing the ground in the upper right is recognized as no ordinary horse, but Hamza’s steed Ashqar, a mount distinguished if not by his crimson coloring, then certainly by his magical third eye.

In most tellings of the story, this is surely how the narrator would use the illustration. But one can easily imagine that the painting could be adapted to other interpretations, so that the boatload of figures would be Umar’s newly provisioned rescue vessel, and the figure on shore his ally Sa’d. It is even conceivable that this same image would be used to accompany both episodes, whether enacted on one night or two. One point is that malefactors in these Homzana illustrations are rarely marked with an obviously villainous appearance, and even some major protagonists have few identifying visual attributes. Another, further-reaching one is that the inexplicitness of most figures and settings in the manuscript is matched well with a collection of stories with a constant general storyline but an infinite number of episodic options.

Many elements in this painting recur throughout the Homzana. The rocks are rendered typically with a constant general storyline but an infinite number of episodic options with dark but thin outlines and a slightly muddy pastel coloring. The trees vary mainly in the shape and color of their trunks and in the form of their yellow-tipped leaves. Most figures’ faces are shown in three-quarter view and are easily categorized into a limited number of types. James are uniformly colored, flat forms overlaid with medallions in gold, with schematic folks making the cuffs, waist, and hem. This repertoire of forms is so standard that the work of an individual artist can be discerned only at a much subtler level. In this case, for example, the broad, tapering faces and tiny eyes signal the work of Shrawana, as do the relatively large medallions on several figures' James.