Hamza’s Spies, sent to Locate the Missing Malik Bahman, Sneak into the City of Qimar, Where They Kill the Sleeping Guards

Malik Bahman, a former enemy who converted to Islam, is sent to negotiate the surrender of Qimar and his city. He, however, is swayed temporarily from his mission because he meets a beautiful maiden with whom he passes time in feasts and dalliance. After Malik Bahman has been gone a while, rumors begin to circulate that he was among those killed in a recent battle. Hearing these rumors, Qimar plots to use them to his advantage, and deceptively proclaims that Malik Bahman is dead indeed, for he had ordered him killed for his reprehensible behavior while he was at Qimar’s court. News of Malik Bahman’s purported death spreads rapidly, causing consternation among Hamza’s army, which is led by Sa’id Farrukh-Nizhad, he of elephantine strength (cat. 52). Some of Hamza’s informants in the city are asked to confirm Malik Bahman’s death, but they cannot, and report that there is a suspicious lack of physical evidence. Qimar knows why this is, of course, and orders a night watchman named Setamsal to scout the city for Malik Bahman. Similarly, two of Hamza’s spies, Songhur Bakhshi and Sabukpay Eiki, learn of the situation and resolve to find out the truth. That night they make their way to an unguarded section of the city walls. Using a rope to scale the tower, they creep into the city and slit the throats of the guards sleeping nearby. They do not get far, however, before they run into Setamsal’s patrol. Songhur leaps to an adjoining rooftop and escapes, but his mate is not so fortunate. As he jumps, the edge of the roof gives way, and he falls into captivity. When the murdered guards are discovered, Sabukpay is taken to prison and put in the same cell as Prince Ibrahim. Hamza’s son.

Dasavanta, the designer of this painting, takes a minor detail from a routine act of espionage—a spy clandestinely entering a city— and makes it the focus of the scene. He does this by isolating the rope-climbing spy against the only relatively plain area in the painting, and by giving him a shield with a loud pattern. More important, he lavishes attention on this figure, so that the spy wears a fiercely determined expression, his body hangs heavily, his feet catch-hold of the rope in a practiced manner, and the rope responds to every straining limb. Only after we pause to admire this agony of stealth and skill do we notice that his fellow spy is already among the sleeping sentinels, holding a severed head aloft as his first trophy and readying a sickle to continue his bloody harvest. The rest of the watchful guard detail, their faces and bodies contorted in sleep, sprawl comically across the brightly tiled watchtower and courtyard.

Contrasting with this ruthless and cluttered environment is the tranquil and luxuriant stand of trees outside the fortress walls. The burgeoning vegetation, rendered with a vigorous but controlled brush, is clearly intended to be an expressive, if not narrative, part of the painting. The charming animals, from the pair of foxes to the monkeys gazing each other, to the parrots flitting among the trees, leave the scene still further.

These two different environments were shaped by a complementary team of artists. Dasavanta laid out the composition and painted the two spies, who stand out from the other figures by style as well as by action. Dasavanta’s hand is visible in the hairy, animated faces of both spies and in the daubed modeling of the lower one’s blue garment. He also contributed the marvelous trees and animals, some of which appear in a virtually identical style in his ascribed painting in the Tutama. The other painter, Mukhli, supplied the guards and their slightly ungainly courtyard. Here, as elsewhere, Mukhli attempts to model his figures’ faces by superimposing faint wrinkles and folds of flesh on them. He models clothing with a similarly heavy-handed convention, an effect particularly conspicuous in the green jama of the recumbent sleeping guard.