Like many legends, the Hamza romance draws freely upon actual historical personages and events, embellishing some with fanciful details and combining others into instructive, if anachronistic tales. Thus it is that Malik Zardusht, known throughout the world as Zoroaster, a major religious leader of the sixth century BC, enters the Hamza legend, which ostensibly recounts the exploits of a figure who lived more than a thousand years later. Zardusht’s role in the realm of myth, of course, is to personify one strain of religious resistance in Iran to Islam. In this, he finds himself allied with Zumurrud Shah, an idolater, with whom he has clashed in the past. Earlier references to Zardusht establish that he dwells in Antal (modern Anatolia), where he is the chief sorcerer. So potent is his own sorcery and so commanding his presence that even Zumurrud Shah defers to him, first soliciting his permission to visit the city of Antal, and then prostrating himself before him.

Zardusht has two daughters. One, called Malaka, had earlier used her own powers of magic to infiltrate Hamza’s camp; upon being discovered by him, she converted to Islam, and promised to use her sorcery only to ensure his conquest of Antal. Zardusht’s other daughter, known as Saradiq, the sorceress, is neither so young nor so compliant, and dies at Hamza’s hand. Although the text describing this event is now missing, Saradiq’s fate is related by her daughter, Manut, when she reveals to Hamza the identity of the woman he has just slain. As always, Hamza rewards the sincere and punishes the unrepentant. Even though she is distraught at the death of her mother and the destruction of her grandfather’s relics, Manut readily accepts Hamza’s invitation to convert and marry one of Hamza’s officers. Other sorcerers spurn this gesture of clemency, and are bound in chains and led away to be executed. One who does fare well when Hamza occupies Zardusht’s palace is Khwaja Muzafar, the hapless doctor (see cat.71). In recompense for the misery visited upon him by Umar, Hamza appoints him governor of Antal.

The caption identifies the subject of this illustration as Hamza immolating the armor chest of Zardusht, and smashing an urn, presumably containing his ashes, on the ground. Zardusht’s spirit, depicted in the form of a faceless warrior, rises from the flames and dissipates. Thus, Hamza simultaneously desecrates a Zoroastrian fire-temple, and weakens the favor of Zardusht’s followers by obliterating all trace of his physical remains.

Despite this violent action, Hamza is shown typically steadfast, holding a small rectangular object—perhaps a mirror—before his face as if to shield it from the conflagration. True to form, Umar responds more actively, twisting his head about to look back toward Hamza even as he points to the shattered urn at his feet. The scene’s arrestive high temperature poisons with Manut, who gesticulates frantically with her arms and stances in anguished disbelief at the ongoing catastrophe. But Dasavanta, the principal artist of this work, carries through the drama even in her clothing: her voluminous blouse, for example, clings to reveal her pendulous breasts and rides up to expose her stomach. These are sure signs that Manut is, after all, still a sorceress, albeit a sympathetic one who will soon be rehabilitated.

Conversely, Dasavanta makes it clear that the sorceresses manacled together opposite Hamza have no redeeming virtues whatsoever. He does so by stigmatizing them as crones with misshapen profiles, snout-like noses, elephantine ears—truly some of the most hideous features of early Mughal painting. Only occasionally does he invoke such stock demonic features such as flaming eye-rims and discus-sized earrings.

Less flamboyant are Hamza’s men, who, hustled together behind a ridge, are overshadowed by the snarling dragon standard above them and the writhing, heavily textured chinar tree beside them. They are the work of Mukhilis, an artist whose figures have dark features and unusually animated expressions. For the splendid fire-temple, Mukhilis repeats the cubic tilework pattern of the courtyard of cat.64 and the magnificent dome from cat.58.

Several faces in this painting now have quite indistinct features; this is not an original effect, but the result of the removal of previously repainted features sometime after 1937.
During a hunt, Prince Hamid, the son of Malik Qasim, grapples with a veiled rider who tries to take the gazelle he has captured. The defeated rider removes her veil to reveal her repellant beauty, and identifies herself as Khursheedchihr ('Sun Cheek'), the princess of the kingdom of Venus. The two naturally grow enamored of each other. Hamid's handsome countenance, however, also catches the attention of Khursheedchihr's mother, who, having been told by her daughter that the radiant youth was a slave, offers to buy him on the spot. Khursheedchihr declines, and begins a love affair with the youth. Meanwhile, the king notices the absence of the queen and princess, and dispatches an ayyar to discover their whereabouts. The ayyar's report provokes the king to send two Zangis to kill Hamid. They meet an untimely end at the hand of Hamid, but another ayyar succeeds in kidnapping the prince. The king orders Hamid thrown into prison.

"The next day when the mother and daughter came before the king and informed him, the girl grew impatient and said, 'O queen, this Zangi they have entrusted with Hamid is in love with me. If you so order, I will go kill him and release Hamid.' With permission she set off. When she came she rendered everyone unconscious, cut the Zangi's head off and rescued Hamid."

Jagana knows how to introduce some variety into a well-established compositional type. As usual, he isolates the protagonists, thus a time in a standard pavilion placed to some side of the courtyard. To avoid the potential monotony of a symmetrical composition, he places the high gateway in the opposite corner and sets it obliquely within the composition. The wall that is contiguous with the gateway now dips downward, and eventually angles upward, at this juncture Jagana inserts a massive bastion, a form that by virtue of its rounded shape and dark color simultaneously breaks up the uninteresting stretch of flat ramparts and establishes a visual axis leading back to Hamid. The artist then manipulates the sprawling bodies of the six slaughtered guards so that they fill nearly every part of the tiled courtyard; the largest guard answers the size and visual weight of Khursheedchihr and Hamid, and two other victims overlap the base of the pavilion just enough to temper the strong geometry of the setting.

Like most artists, Jagana consistently draws upon his own personal repertoire of forms. As in cat. 63, his guards are simple, flattened shapes, and their clothes are either overbid with an unconstrusive pattern in gold or are left altogether plain. Jagana reuses some poses from that same painting, casting both the large guard in orange and the figure dressed in pink and blue in positions virtually identical to those used earlier. He maintains the strong tilwerk pattern of the courtyard used in both cat. 35 and 63, as well as the convention of shading the bricks of the outer wall. Other architectural details are more distinctive, particularly the pronounced oval ring around the necking on the gateway supports, and the back-and-white slay around each gateway panel.

Jagana's collaborator is Shrvana, who supplied the figures of Khursheedchihr and Hamid, as well as the area immediately around them. Khursheedchihr's rounded, thickset face compares closely to those of the female attendants in cat. 47, and the unusual forest-green color of her clothing recurs in many of Shrvana's works. Hamid's face and neck have been repainted in modern times, but his ama shows the same limited modelling that Shrvana applies to nearly all his figures. Finally, there is Shrvana's penchant for large foliate forms, found both in its customary position in the carpet border and on the capitals and bases of the slender columns.
Mihrukh is a beautiful young woman searching for her husband, Prince Hamid. Disguised in male attire, she attracts the interest of the princess Afsar Banu. One day, while accompanying Afsar Banu on a hunt, Mihrukh rides after a gazelle and becomes separated from the princess’s retinue. Finally she finds herself lost and alone at the seashore. A boat passes by, but the captain refuses to pick her up until she offers her horse in payment. The boat sinks in a storm, and only Mihrukh manages to make it to an island. When rescue finally does come, it is again a mixed blessing, for the rowboat that stops for her is occupied by one old man and four youths. The youths quickly see through her disguise and begin to press their affections on her. Mihrukh, of course, wants none of this, and devises a plan to rid herself of them. She proposes that she shoot an arrow onto the shore, and declares that whichever of them retrieves the arrow will have her as the prize. Now Mihrukh will soon have occasion to display her accuracy with the bow, but here she is more concerned with raw distance. Shoot she does, and the four youths run off after the bride-winning shaft. Mihrukh has planned all along to use this opportunity to escape, and now appeals to the kindly old man to help her. Seeing a chance to teach the youths a lesson, he readily agrees and rows the boat away, leaving the youths forlorn and frustrated.

Many vicissitudes later, Mihrukh finds herself besieged by suitors once more. Again she uses her skill with a bow to select the most worthy. Only one man meets her challenge—to fire an arrow through a small ring suspended at the top of a high tower—and he proves to be her missing husband, Prince Hamid.