PLATE 14

Akbar Hunting in an Enclosure

Aided by cheetahs and huntsmen, Akbar gallops through an enclosure of animals, firing arrows at the trapped beasts, in a hunting technique known as qamargah. During such a hunt, near Bhera, when he was thirty-six in 1578, Akbar was disgusted by the slaughter and ordered his men to cease. The carnage had so disturbed him that it sparked a religious experience. In the words of Abu’l Fazl, “A sublime joy overtook his bodily frame. The attraction of cognition of God cast its ray.” Afterwards, “active men made every endeavor that no one should touch the feather of a finch and that they should allow all the animals to depart according to their habits.” Later, Akbar gave much gold to the holy men and poor of the region, and when he returned to Fatehpur Sikri, he filled a large tank in the palace with money for charity (Akbarnamah, vol. II, pp. 245-254).

Hunting was an ancient royal activity, perhaps traceable to the need of villagers for protection against lions and tigers. In time, it became ritualized and took on symbolic meaning. In such combats, kings, representing goodness, slew evil beasts, as part of life’s cosmic pattern.

Conceivably, Miskin was aware of both the symbolic and worldly significance of his miniature, which ranks artistically with ‘Ali Mungir Hunting Nilgai (Plate 38), to which it offers many comparisons. While the mood of the earlier hunt is informal, noisy, and wildly energetic, the later one is orderly, courtly, and hushed.

PLATE 15

Akbar in Old Age

Looking pallid and drained, Akbar is shown in old age, probably not long before his death at sixty-four in 1605. Behind him, seemingly worried, his grandson Prince Khurram (later Shah Jahan) turns to his bibulous older brother, Prince Khurram. The courtier saluting the emperor appears to be Hakim ‘Ali Gilani, the physician who attended Akbar in his last illness and who was also Prince Khurram’s chief tutor. An unidentified huntsman tries unsuccessfully to attract the attention of a hound. He holds a superb green matchlock, symbolic perhaps of activities forsaken in old age.

Manohar’s group portrait sensitively conveys a mood of sadness and tension, and as such it is a landmark in the development of its genre, which could be considered the outstanding expression of Mughal art. This sensitive, three-quarter view of Akbar may be the very picture that provided the model for countless posthumous likenesses, such as those made for Shah Jahan, who must have remembered his grandfather as we see him here, and who remained at his bedside until the end.
PLATE 16

The Birth of a Prince

Jahangir’s historical pictures transport us into Mughal times. Bishndas’s description of the birth of a prince, probably of Jahangir himself, is unusually rich in anecdote. Through his eyes, we peer into the harem, where the proud mother (a Rajputi entitled Mariam Zamman) is being shown her infant, surrounded by fellow wives, eunuch guards, servants, and musicians. A very senior wife (probably Akbar’s mother, Mariam Makani), seated in an armchair, shares her pleasure, while others register moods varying from amusement to jealous rage. A sumptuously gilded and jewelled crib awaits the baby; distant nursemaids gossip and gather necessaries; and, below, royal attendants bring trays of presents, presumably from Akbar. Flowers are strewn across the harem door, which is also protected by a curtain, around which a curious nursemaid peers a peep. In the foreground, seated against a red sandstone wall typical of Fatehpur Sikri, astrologers prepare the prince’s horoscope.

Bishndas was one of Jahangir’s ablest portrait painters. In his Memoirs in the fourteenth year of his reign, Jahangir wrote, “At the time when I sent Khan ‘Alam (as ambassador) to Persia, I had sent with him a painter of the name of Bishan Das, who was unequalled in his age for taking likenesses, to take the portraits of the Shah and the chief men of his state, and bring them. He had drawn the likenesses of most of them, and especially had taken that of my brother the Shah exceedingly well, so that when I showed it to any of his servants, they said it was well drawn.” Later, he added, “Bishan Das, the painter was honored with the gift of an elephant.” (Memoirs, vol. II, pp. 116–117.)
PLATE 17

Jahangir in Darbar

Jahangir is shown in the audience hall at Agra receiving a typical assembly. Nearest him stands his four-year-old grandson, Prince Shah Shuja (Plate 35), who was brought up at court by Jahangir and Nur Jahan. Next to him is his father, Prince Khurram (Shah Jahan) with his hands ceremoniously crossed. Among the many courtiers below the throne is a Jesuit priest, Father Corsi, whose name is inscribed.

Impressive with their wealth of textiles, jewels, animals, and reverential nobles, such scenes were almost daily events at the imperial court, where protocol became increasingly rigid and complex, determining where one stood, what one wore, and the precise positions of one’s hands. Artists were in attendance to make sketches from which to paint illustrations, such as this one, for official histories.

Jahangir was realistic about his appearance and urged artists to paint him, as here, with every wrinkle and jowl. Many of the lesser figures were depicted with less attentiveness. They do not interact, and most of their heads are inconsistent in scale because they were pounced from the life-drawings that were part of every court portraitist’s equipment. Although each nobleman was rendered accurately, gatherings of them were symbols of the emperor’s total domination, human bouquets for an autocrat. Occasionally noblemen were painted in darbar scenes who are known not to have been there, or even to have died prior to the event.

This picture, which must have been painted for the largest and finest history of Jahangir’s reign, is inscribed “Work of the humble house-born (artists).” Although the names are not given, they were probably Abu’l Hasan and Manohar.
Jahangir described this episode, which took place in 1607, in his Memoirs:

"On Friday . . . I came to the quarters of Khurram which had been made in the Usta Garden. In truth, the building is a delightful and well proportioned one. Whereas it was the rule of my father to have himself weighed twice every year, (once) according to the solar and (once according to the) lunnar year, and to have the princes weighed according to the solar year, and moreover in this year, which was the commencement of my son Khurram's sixteenth lunar year, the astrologers and astronomers represented that a most important epoch according to his horoscope would occur, as the prince's health had not been good, I gave an order that they should weigh him according to the prescribed rule, against gold, silver, and other metals, which should be divided among fakirs and the needy."

(Memoirs, vol 1, p. 115.)

As so often in Mughal art, this miniature brings together the worlds of flesh and spirit. While the setting is packed with rich carpets, jewels, imported Chinese statuettes, and gem-studded weapons, the background opens into a visionary garden.
PLATE 19

"Daulat the Painter and 'Abd al-Rahim the Scribe"

A true lover of books, pictures, and virtually all collectables, Jahangir never tired of their pleasures. Many manuscripts and miniatures are inscribed in his own hand with appreciative and discerning comments. A Khamsa of Nizami copied for Akbar by the eminent scribe 'Abd al-Rahim, known as Ambar Qalam ("Amber Pen"), was given a personal touch by Jahangir. He commissioned Daulat, one of his best painters, to add this portrait of himself painting the revered scribe to the colophon of the manuscript. Both men are shown with the materials of their trades in workaday attitudes. Daulat also adorned the borders of an album page datable between 1609–11 with similar portrayals of Abu'l Hasan, Manohar, and Govardhan as well as another self-portrait (see Yedda J. Godard, "Les Marges du Murakka Gulshan," Athar-e Ivan, tome 1, fasc. 1, Haarlem, 1936, pp. 11–33.) The album is now in the Gulistan Library, Tehran.