"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 Khaman of Nizami copied for Akbar by the eminent scribe 'Abd al-Rahim, known as Ambur 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 1608-14 with similar portrayals of Abu'l Hasan, Manohar, and Gavardhan as well as another self-portrait (see Yehuda Godard, "Les Marges du Murakka Gulsan," Abar-e Iran, tome 1, fasc. 1, Haarlem, 1936, pp. 11-33). The album is now in the Gulistan Library, Teheran.
PLATE 20

A Thoughtful Man

Who was this serious but exquisite ponderer of life? Whether poet or philosopher, he strokes his beard in deep reflection. Despite his ease and grace of pose, the gentle elegance of his hands, and the idyllic setting of grass and flowers, his mood is disquieting. His forehead seems tense, with eyebrows raised over fearful eyes, and his sensitive lips are set in perturbation. Behind, a soaring aura of flame-like blossoms symbolizes his thoughts. But like his sumptuous closed book, and the rich assemblage of flasks, cups, vases, and boxes—all containers of the unknown—their meaning is secret.

This brilliant, baffling jewel of a picture, a painted dance of broken curves, must once have adorned one of Jahangir's albums. His taste for foreign styles of art included Persian, European, and those of his neighboring rivals, the sultans of the Deccan. Here, the artist worked in a modified version of the Bijapur style, combining insightful Mughal characterization with markedly Persian color harmonies, a rhyme-scheme of repeated patterns, and a typically Bijapuri palette of golden-tan and rose-violet. Although Robert Skelton has attributed this picture to Farrukh Beg, an artist from Khurasan who worked for Akbar and Jahangir and visited the Deccan, the style is so like Muhammad 'Ali's, whose name is inscribed on the border, that we accept it as his.
Jahangir’s Dream

Fretful over the possible loss to the Safavis of the strategic fortress of Qandahar, Jahangir had a dream of Shah ’Abbas Safavi appearing in a well of light and making him happy. According to the inscriptions on this miniature, he commissioned Abu’l Hasan to paint it.

Qandahar guarded the Mughals’ vulnerable northwestern frontier and had been contested by Safavis and Mughals ever since Humayun had failed to return it to Shah Tahmasp (see Introduction). In 1613, Jahangir sent Khan ’Alam as ambassador to Shah ’Abbas to plead the Mughal case. His mission failed. The Persians took Qandahar in 1622 while Jahangir was too preoccupied with Shah Jahan’s rebellion to stop them.

Abu’l Hasan’s portrait, according to an inscription, was based upon inquiries—no doubt assisted by portraits from life by Bishndas, who accompanied the embassy. Eager to please his worried patron, Abu’l Hasan painted a frail Shah ’Abbas with fashionably hennaed hands, cowering in the embrace of mighty Jahangir. Like the Hindu god Ganesh on his rodent vehicle, the royal pair are borne by tactfully selected animals, which in turn rest on a terrestrial globe. The Mughal strides on a powerful but peaceful lion that has nudged the Shah’s miserable sheep into the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, the Iranian has the good fortune to share Nur ud-din (“Light of Religion”) Jahangir’s refugent halo, the massed light of sun and moon, supported by European-inspired angels.
Jahangir Enthroned on an Hourglass

Haggard and resignedly gazing upwards, Jahangir offers a book to Shaikh Husain of the Chishti Shrine, a spiritual descendant of Shaikh Salim, to whom Akbar had gone prayerfully (and successfully) in the hope of an heir. The boon was granted, and at birth the prince, later Jahangir, was named Salim in gratitude to the saint.

In this allegory, painted almost a lifetime later, Jahangir sits on an hourglass throne. Although cupids have inscribed it with the wish that he might live a thousand years, the sands of time have almost run out. The Emperor is turning from this world to the next. The picture is inscribed, "Though outwardly shahs stand before him, he fixes his gaze on dervishes." He offers the book (of his life) to the saint rather than to the earthbound standing by his curious throne: not to the Ottoman sultan (a generalized likeness based perhaps on a European print); nor to King James I of England (copied from an English miniature); and not even to Bichitr, a symbolic ruler of art, who painted himself holding a miniature showing two horses and an elephant—presents from his appreciative patron—and a deeply bowing self-portrait.

Like the hourglass throne, which may have been based on a small gilt-bronze and glass original, the idea of allegorical state portraits came from Europe, as did the cupids, who cover their eyes, either out of sadness for the aging emperor, or, more likely, for protection against the blinding radiance of his sun and moon halo.

Bichitr was a brilliant young follower of Abu’l Hasan who became one of Shah Jahan’s leading court artists. Like Abu’l Hasan, he was prolific and all-encompassing, capable of painting everything from complex historical subjects to animals, highly inventive ornament, and sensitive individual portraits.

The verse quoted above was translated by Wheeler Thackston.
PLATE 23

‘Inayat Khan Dying

Few civilizations confronted death as coolly as the Mughals. In his Memoirs, Jahangir wrote of this moving portrait:

"On this day news came of the death of ‘Inayat Khan. He was one of my intimate attendants. As he was addicted to opium, and when he had the chance, to drinking as well, by degrees he became maddened with wine. As he was weakly built, he took more than he could digest, and was attacked by the disease of diarrhoea and in this weak state he two or three times fainted. By my order Hakim Rukna applied remedies, but whatever methods were resorted to gave no profit. At the same time a strange hunger came over him, and although the doctor exerted himself in order that he should not eat more than once in twenty-four hours, he could not restrain himself. He also would throw himself like a madman on water and fire until he fell into a bad state of body. At last, he became dropical, and exceedingly low and weak. Some days before this, he had petitioned that he might go to Agra. I ordered him to come into my presence and obtain leave. They put him into a palanquin and brought him. He appeared so low and weak that I was astonished. ‘He was skin drawn over bones’ (verse) or rather his bones, too, had dissolved. Though painters have striven much in drawing an emaciated face, yet I have never seen anything like this, or even approaching to it. Good God, can a son of man come to such a shape and fashion?’"

"As it was a very extraordinary case, I directed painters to take his portrait."


This sad event took place in 1618.

It is enlightening to compare this painting to a preparatory sketch (Figure V). Although the drawing is more gripping in its uncompromising starkness, the painting is almost as moving. In it, some of our attention is directed away from the dying man to the arabesque carpet and pillows, one of which is large and dark, like a storm cloud descending.
PLATE 24

Hindu Holy Men

In "spiritual darbar" five sanyasis, who have renounced the world, meditate beneath a neem tree, near a Hindu shrine close to Ajmer. The senior holy man, whose fingernails have grown into long coils, is elevated and illumined by deep concentration. His hair is very long and cultivated into a thick protective shawl. To his right, a seated ascetic whose hair has been shaped into a turban, recites mantras with a rosary of rudraksha seeds, while gazing toward the artist, or viewer. Opposite him, an old man, naked except for a light cloth over his knees and arms, looks ahead in profound distraction, while, behind him, a fourth reclines in troubled sleep. In the foreground, a chela, or apprentice, stretches out, totally naked except for a nubbly red cloth over his legs. His pose seems to have been inspired by a European mannerist print.

Although unsigned, this painting is certainly by Govardhan, who also painted Plate 28. His favorite palette is the golden-tan and gray one shown here, where it is keyed to the subject by the dung fire and the ashcovered figures. As an artist, he invites comparison to Basawan and Daulat, who shared his spiritually uplifting Rembrandtesque world of softly rounded, almost liquid forms and soulfully picturesque portraiture—rather than to Abu’l Hasan or Bichitr, who concentrated upon the richer, hard-edged, more brightly hued ambiance of imperial panoply.
PLATE 25

Squirrels in a Plane Tree

Why is the eager hunter climbing the tree? Does he really believe he can catch squirrels bare-handed? Or is he the artist's symbol of foolish, wicked man bent on destroying innocent nature? Knowing of Jahangir's interest in strange happenings, the man may indeed be a virtuoso of the chase. If the subject of the painting is baffling, its rank as a masterpiece of natural history picture is not.

Such subjects were favored in Mughal India. According to the Memoirs of Jaoher, a servant of Humayun, a beautiful bird once flew into the imperial tent and "his Majesty ... took a pair of scissors and cut some of the feathers off the animal; he sent for a painter, and had a picture taken of the bird, and afterwards ordered it to be released." (Jaoher, The Tazkira of Vakil, tr. by Maj. Charles Stewart, Santiago de Compostella, Spain, N.D. p. 43.) While there are earlier examples of the genre, it was not until the reign of Jahangir that flora and fauna painting reached the degree of naturalism seen here, in which every beady eye, hungrily eager look, and springing tail is recorded with loving perfection.

The attribution of this picture is problematic, for an inscription on the back assigns it to "Abu'l Hasan, Nadir al-Afr," which combines Abu'l's name with the title of another artist, Mansur. Conceivably both worked on it, although the squirrels are so roundly treated and with such painterly, as opposed to draughtsmanship, qualities that we tend to see the squirrels as Abu'l Hasan's work.