An Incident at the Siege of Qandahar

As the favorite and eldest son of Shah Jahan, Dara Shikoh was appointed to lead a huge army to force the Safavi army from Qandahar, the strategic fortress defending the empire's northwest frontier. The campaign was not a success. In October of 1653, the prince retreated, after having scored few points against the Persians. One worthy of a painter's efforts was painted here. A lucky hit in the powder magazine of a small subsidiary fort brightened the sky with fireworks. Unfortunately, it also illumined the corpses and skeletons on the bleak, de-forested hill of battle, before which Dara Shikoh and his armies stand in proud rows.

Dara Shikoh preferred holy men, philosophers, and musicians to soldiers (Plate 36). His preparations for the siege verged on Quixoticism: as usual astrologers determined when to attack, but the spiritually elevated prince added a personal touch—a corps of holy men to augment mere military power. One of his warriors was a naked yogi, who was granted entry into the Safavi fort on the claim that he was a friend of the Mughal prince. Once inside, the harmless fellow was seized and ordered to work his magic against his own armies. When his spells failed, the poor fellow was tossed to his death off the fort walls.

Payag specialized in darkly romantic pictures: holy men by flickering candlelight, beneath moonlit cloudy skies, and battle scenes such as this, which evoke Altdorfer's painted visions. Here, as usual in his work, every infinitesimally small personage is an intriguing portrait.
PLATE 34
An Abyssinian from Ahmdnagar

Single figures, standing in isolation as though at court before the emperor, were a specialty of Mughal painters as early as the Akbar period (Figure IV). Here, Hashim has united power with elegance in a portrayal of a massive Abyssinian wearing the gold belt and pendants characteristic of Ahmdnagar, a rival power in the Deccan. His quick eye noted the twisted belt, strained by a pendulous melanotic belly, the seams of the gusseted transparent shirt, and the pinkish fingers holding a superb Deccani sword. In contrast to the subject’s massive arms and stately gait, Hashim invented a subtly lyrical color harmony of whites, off-whites, and duck-egg blue, accented by deep brown skin, gold, richer blues in the sheath and scabbard, and vermilion shoes. The discolorations in the background are due to the artist’s final touches, using a mixture of pigments that included a khaki which darkens in time.

The portrait somewhat resembles Malik Ambar, the proud and able Abyssinian statesman whose generalship was largely responsible for the successful Deccani resistance to the Mughals before he died at eighty in 1626. It probably portrays his son, Fath Khan, who yielded the important fort of Daulatabad to the Mughals, after a three and one half month siege in 1633. He was invited to court, where this portrait was probably painted, and allowed by Shah Jahan to retire to Lahore with a generous allowance.
PLATE 35

Royal Lovers on a Terrace

Gazing deeply into one another’s eyes, and attended by taciturn servant girls and a musician, a loving couple enjoys the cool of dusk, a favorite time in India. The prince is Shah Shuja, second son of Shah Jahan, who was born in 1616 at Ajmer. In 1638, he married the daughter of Mirza Rustam Safavi, a great courtier and wit who was related to the royal house of Iran. As a child, Shah Shuja was loved by Nur Jahan and his grandfather, Jahangir, near whom he stands in Plate 17. He grew up pampered at the imperial court, but while he was a beautiful child, portraits of him at fifteen in the Shah Jahan-nama and elsewhere look prematurely middle-aged.

In this portrait, which must have been painted at the time of the prince’s marriage, Bal Chand emphasized the couple’s inner sweetness at a tender moment. Underscoring their physical shortcomings, it is one of the most movingly romantic of Mughal miniatures. As usual in his courtly style, Bal Chand balances the gem-like hardness of textile patterns, wine cups, and symbolically interwoven trees with soft passages, such as the gently moving river and distant architecture. Like the Taj Mahal, this picture celebrates the purity of white, as in the subtle placing of the prince’s white shirt and pajamah against a carpet of white arabesque. In the foreground, freely scattered white flowers counterpoint the geometry of rectangles and auspicious swastikas. Unwilling to mar his picture with disturbing realities, the artist chopped off two of the four poles supporting the canopy.

Although intelligent, active, and effective by nature, Shah Shuja was softened by life in Bengal, where he was appointed governor in 1639. He was no match for his younger brother Aurangzeb in the wars of succession that began during Shah Jahan’s illness in 1657. In 1659, Aurangzeb defeated Shah Shuja at the battle of Khajwa, near Allahabad. With his family, he fled to Bengal, and sought refuge in Arakan. Some claim that he was murdered there, after which his wife and daughters committed suicide.
To prevent a repetition of his own and his father's rebellions against imperial parents, the emperor kept Dara close to the throne. In consequence, he was able to pursue artistic and theological interests. Like Akbar, he was fascinated by Hinduism and he translated Hindu texts, discoursed with holy men, and may well have been the patron of portraits of them (Plate 29).

Regrettably, these peaceful activities were poor preparation for war. As we have seen, Qandahar could not be captured by spiritual force. Moreover, his religious tolerance, so similar to Akbar's, was at odds with prevailing attitudes. In the wars of succession, Dara was hopelessly outmatched by Aurangzeb, his orthodox and militant younger brother. After two defeats in battle, he was hunted down by Aurangzeb's armies and betrayed by a nobleman whose life he had once saved. In the Delhi streets, he was forced to sit backward on an elephant and to be pelted with offal by hooligans. But more citizens shed tears than reviled him, and Dara's popularity threatened Aurangzeb's throne. After a trial for heresy, Dara Shikoh was executed in his jail cell, before the eyes of a favorite son. When his bleeding head was brought, Aurangzeb wept.

Bichitr painted the prince with learned and talented friends at the height of his power, when poetry, music, and serious conversation were his chief concerns. The prince and his guests are eminently aristocratic. The setting verges on paradise: a garden fragrant with flowers and a platform covered with superb carpets. A servant offers wine, others await attentively, and in the distance a bed is prepared for Dara's rest after the party. Bichitr describes all this with his usual masterfulness, delighting in such passages as the reflections on glass, transparency of wine, and cast shadows. The curving fingers of the soldier in the foreground are a minor but telling clue to his style.
PLATE 37

Darbar of ‘Alamgir

Shah Jahan’s third son, Aurangzeb, took the title of ‘Alamgir (“Seizer of the Universe”) when he assumed the throne after imprisoning his father in 1658. Although he was the mightiest of Mughals, he was also the most destructive to the empire. Despite his religious piety, frequent thoughtfulness on a personal level, and machine-like industry, his policies tore down what his great-grandfather had built. While Akbar had fostered unity between Muslims and Hindus, ‘Alamgir’s zealous Sunni orthodoxy alienated most Hindus, including the soldierly Rajputs, whose arms had contributed so essentially to the formation and maintenance of the empire. By over-expansion in conquering the Deccan, his empire became unwieldy. The later decades of his long reign were spent trying to stamp out rebellions. Sadly, before his death at ninety, ‘Alamgir was aware of many of his grim follies.

In spite of his later austerity, which turned him against music, dance, and painting, a few of the best Mughal paintings were made for ‘Alamgir. Perhaps the painters realized that he might close the workshops and therefore exceeded themselves in his behalf. For whatever reason, this darbar is of stunning quality. The awesomely dignified emperor holds a hawk, while seated on an elegantly unpretentious gold throne beneath a canopy adorned with birds of paradise. His third son, Muhammad A’zam, who was born in 1653, stands facing him, looking very boyish and lively in contrast to the formality of the others. The black-bearded dignitary to his left is Shaisteh Khan, son of Nur Jahan’s brother ‘Aaaf Khan.

Probably painted for an album, this miniature might be by Bichitr.
"'Alamgir Hunting Nilgai"

This large hunting scene can hardly be bettered in seventeenth-century Mughal art, even though it was painted for the austere 'Alamgir, who virtually closed down the royal workshops a few years after he came to the throne. It was probably painted by Bichtir, the major master who had worked for Jahangir and Shah Jahan (Plates 22, 36), whose signature is on a smaller but stylistically identical picture in the Custodia Foundation, Paris.

Dressed in hunting green (even his halo is camouflaged), the emperor sits on a small carpet behind two attendants who support his matchlock, whose fuse has burned to the end and fired its charge. Shot in the heart, the nilgai (literally "blue cow," although related to the deer) tumbles dead, a victim of the decoy staked near a water-hole and imperial marksmanship. A scrubby landscape stretches into low hills and distant cliffs across the picture, which includes a city on the horizon. Nearer by, 'Alamgir's state elephants, one with a golden howdah, reveal the lavishness of his hunting expedition. Wherever we look, beaters, huntsman, courtiers, and other attendants dot the vast field.

However much 'Alamgir enjoyed such entertainments early in his reign when this picture must have been painted, he soon became too preoccupied with matters of state for such indulgences. Alas, instead of enjoying imperial prerogatives, he spent most of his reign in serious pursuits, such as conquering the Deccan, a triumph that brought the empire to its peak of size but also made it unwieldy. The later decades of 'Alamgir's life were all spent in the Deccan, stamping out rebellions.
Nicknamed "Rangila" ("Pleasure Lover"), Muhammad Shah attempted at first to bring stability to the crumbling empire, a hopeless task. Eager for easy riches, Nadir Shah the Persian invaded Hindustan in 1739, sacked Delhi, and left. Unwilling to serve the empire, Muhammad Shah's ablest and most powerful nobles set up independent states at Oudh, in Bengal, and in the Deccan, where the Nizams of Hyderabad held sway. Once, when a Nizam visited Delhi, the emperor achieved a moment of revenge. On a very hot day, an imperial enemysay interrupted the Nizam's noon nap with an urgent invitation to come to the Jama Masjid (Shah Jahan's mosque). There, standing in the broiling sun, the emperor greeted his guest, and kept him standing bare feet on burning stone, until the poor fellow danced with pain.

Most of the time, however, Muhammad Shah cultivated the arts: music, gardening, dance, and painting. His artists' work is unmistakable, with its crisp, bright palette, dazzling red-orange and gold skies, and deliberately un-intimate portraiture. At best, as here, his pictures are thinly painted late flow-erings from a slowly dying tradition. But such passages as the flowers and leaves silhouetted against white are sensitive and genuinely moving. Mughal culture long survived its political failure.
PLATE 40

Bahadur Shah II


A talented poet, Bahadur Shah II might also have been a great ruler; but his reign was a tragicomedy of overblown titles and tinsel grandeur. An aspiring prince once tried to poison him with a tiger’s whisker. Although a puppet of the British most of his reign, in 1857 he was coerced into nominally leading the Scipoy Rebellion, which ended with most of his sons shot dead and Bahadur Shah himself put to trial. According to Delhi tradition, on his arrest a favorite elephant, Maula Baksh, was in maut (heat). On regaining his senses, the animal roamed the Delhi streets searching for his master. The elephant’s vast corpse was found in Fereoshah Koila. Bahadur Shah was exiled to Burma, where his few remaining years were spent writing sad verse.

My heart finds no love in a realm so desolate.
Whose bride is found in a world so inconstant?
From a long life’s wish, but four days were granted:
Two were spent in desire, two elapsed in longing.
Say if you will: Live apart from this place of yearnings.
But where is there such space in a scarred heart?
How star-crossed is Zafar, that for his grave
He found not even two yards of ground in the lane of the Beloved.

(A ghazal written by the emperor, whose poetical name was Zafar, before his death in exile. Translated by Brian Silver.)