74. A Young Scribe

By Mir Sayyid-'Ali

Ca. 1555

190 x 105 mm.

Lent by Edwin Binney, 3rd

When the second Mughal emperor, Humayun (r. 1530–1556) was exiled, he was granted sanctuary by Shah Tahmasp, who at the time was turning away from active patronage of painting. While visiting the Tabriz court in 1542, according to Qazi Ahmad, Humayun requested the services of Mir Sayyid-'Ali. "But his son," the Qazi added, "was more arifful than the father," and hearing of the emperor’s interest, "rushed off to India, leaving his father to follow." Bayzad’s eyewitness Memoire on Humayun’s court in exile (1540–1555) says that in 1540 he entrusted a departing Safavid envoy with an imperial rescript summoning two painters from Tabriz, Mir Sayyid-'Ali and 'Abd us-Samad. They went to Qandahar and remained there for about a year before being escorted to Kabul, where they arrived on the first of November 1549. Five years later in November 1554, they accompanied the emperor when he left for India.

Presumably the young scribe was painted soon after their arrival in India, before Humayun’s death in January 1556, for it is signed “Painter of the Realm of Humayun Shahi,” implying that the emperor was still alive. In style, it recalls the artist’s figures in such Tabriz works as the Nomadic Encampment (no. 69), although the curious illogic of the book-stand perhaps hints at the artist’s increasing difficulties in confronting reality.1

Inscribed

ton top of folio of writing

"On the frontispiece of his mind he had written, ‘Better a forceful master than a father over-kind.’"

at bottom

Mir Sayyid-'Ali, who is ‘‘The Rarity of the Realm of Humayun the Shah” painted this.


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75. Shah Abu'l-Ma'ali
By Dust-Muhammad
Ca. 1556-60
301 x 247 mm. (folio size)
Private Collection

Bayazid's Memoir says that Mulla Dust, i.e., Dust-Muhammad, "the top painter of them all," although uninvited by Emperor Humayun, joined the Mughal court at Kabul in November 1540, at the same time as Mir Sayyid-'Ali and 'Abd us-Samad. He took up service not with the emperor himself, but with Prince Kassert, Humayun's brother and dangerous rival in Afghanistan. Bayazid also supplies the motive for Mulla (more usually Master) Dust's emigration: "He could not get by without the wine the Shah [Tahmasp] had forbidden. So he left on his own and came unannounced." He also tells us that the artist was in the retinue of painters accompanying Humayun on his departure from Kabul for the reconquest of Mughal India. An uncertain Mughal source informs us that Master Dust remained in India after the succession of Humayun's son Akbar (r. 1556-1605), but that he had returned to Shah Tahmasp's court at about the age of seventy by 1560.1

Shah Abu'l-Ma'ali, according to Abu'l-Fazl's Akbarnama (Story of Akbar), appeared at Humayun's court in 1551 and became, as much due to his beauty as to his audacity, a most favored protege of the emperor. His closeness to Humayun, as well as his fanaticism and violence fomented ill feelings, especially among Humayun's sons. After Akbar's accession in 1556, Shah Abu'l-Ma'ali was strangled.

Inscribed
on folio of writing

God is the Greater. This picture is a portrait of Shah Abu'l-Ma'ali of Kashgar—he who has served as close confidant to the now late Emperor Humayun. Done by Master Dust the Painter.

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1. For a portrait of Humayun and his court of this period, attributable to Dust-Muhammad, as well as an early seventeenth-century Mughal version of Hafiz's and the Worm (no. 31), presumably made from a drawing or tracing brought to the Mughal court by the artist, see Ernst Kühlmeil and Hermann Goetz, Indian Book Painting from Jahangir's Album in the State Library in Berlin (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1928) pls. 4, 3, and 1.

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Shaykh-Muhammad’s career can be divided into three major periods: the years of apprenticeship to Master Dust-Muhammad (stylistically apparent and also supported by Qadi Ahmad) those from the late 1530s until 1556, when he was an independent master and the years from 1556 into the 1570s, when he served the Shah’s nephew, Sultan Ibrahim Mirza. During the middle period, his style was highly controlled, hard-edged, and comparatively austere, as can be seen from the Camel and Groom (no. 73). Later, under the influence of Ibrahim, as is already apparent in the present portrait, his manner became increasingly extreme, culminating in the loose, calligraphic flamboyance of the Wayward Youths (no. 84).

Inscribed

beneath figure
etching this is Shaykh . . .

on folio he holds

To savor the air at the meadows — there’s my desire; where she soays like a jasmined cypress — there’s my desire.

1. Ibrahim Mirza was appointed governor of Mashhad in 1556 and remained there until he fell from favor in 1564, from 1564 until 1586, he was in exile in Qazvin; and the bleak period of his life continued at Sabaqvar from 1586 to 1574, when he was forgiven by his uncle and invited to return to court at Qazvin.
77. An Amir Seated Beneath a Tree

Attributable to Shaykh-Muhammad

Ca. 1557

265 x 160 mm. (miniature only)

Lent by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Francis Bartlett Donation of 1912 and Picture Fund (14.998)

Bristling with sword, mace, bow, and arrows this Uzbek dates from Shaykh-Muhammad’s early maturity, before he had been strongly influenced by the extremism of Sultan Ibrahim and his Mashhad court. Something of a specialist in battle scenes, of which he painted several for the Freer Jami manuscript, Shaykh-Muhammad apparently respected and sympathized with this well armed figure, whose suspicious, cautious eyes kept watch on the artist. The smiling mouth pulls up slightly at the left, suggesting the sitter’s—and artist’s—cynical alertness. Although this Uzbek can probably be identified as one of the refugee khans who passed peacefully through Mashhad on the way to the Shah’s court in 1537, he was nonetheless one of the enemy threatening the Safavid’s eastern border. Neither the khan nor Shaykh-Muhammad could have overlooked the ominous symbolism of the powerful, forked trunk of the blossoming tree in the background, which a few quick hacks of a blade could have made into a cagoule or yoke, the traditional restraint for prisoners.

The importance of this psychologically penetrating likeness is underscored by the treatment in relief of turban and hands.

1. See Welch, Persian Painting, pl. 39.

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Feline and languorous, this young man introduces us to the world of the Freer Jami of 1555-1563, a manuscript we are unable to exhibit, but whose character we can grasp from several closely related miniatures (nos. 76, 77, 79, and 80) and three illustrations in our Introduction (figs. 9–11). It was illustrated for Prince Ibrahim Mirza, nephew and son-in-law of Shah Tahmasp and son of Bahram Mirza, who became the principal patron of the court artists when Tahmasp’s interest in painting declined. In mood, the Jami Haft Awrang differs greatly from the Khamsa. Gradually disappearing are the courtly, restrained manners of the 1540s, which are replaced by increasingly louche behavior, similar, perhaps, to the shift in mood in our own era from the 1950s to the 1960s. Mirza’-Ali’s princess (see no. 70) exemplifies the ethos of the 1540s in contrast to this youth, who could almost be her son. She is straight-backed and dignified, with her weight centered and her warm nature held in check—her reserve comparable to Shah Tahmasp’s deepening circumspection and orthodoxy. The youth, on the other hand, seems akin to the charmingly wayward Prince Ibrahim as he sprawls, caressing the golden pillow and imagining some absent beloved. His attenuated cone-shaped neck and lithe torso are similar to those of the princess and of many of Mirza’-Ali’s figures for the Quinst (such as no. 50). Patterns of behavior and art styles change, it seems, but not feelings. However “classic” Mirza’-Ali’s earlier pictures might seem, and however mannered his later ones, all reveal the same preoccupation with human quirks and with anatomical engineering.1

1. For a color reproduction, see Stuart Cary Welch, “Pictures from the Hindu and Muslim Worlds,” Apollo 107 (1978): p. 443, pl. IX.
79. Horseman and Groom
Attributable to Qadimi
Ca. 1560
244 x 186 mm. (miniature only)

Qadimi, rough and ready, appealed to young Shah Tahmasp during the years of the Shahnama. But the artist’s Rabelaisian gusto was ill-suited to the refined ambiance of the Qajar, and his buoyant spirits must have been sadly dashed by being excluded from the project. Nevertheless, he lived on like some stout old housey surviving into springtime until, at last, his talents were again in demand. Sultan Ibrahim Mirza’s youthful zest for low comedy led him to include several miniatures ascribable to the aging buffoon of the workshop in his sprightly Jami. These pictures, outwardly far more suave and tidy than those Qadimi contributed to the Shahnama (nos. 17 and 22), bring to mind a burlesque comedian attired for a royal wedding. However fine the brushwork and complex the designs, their artist’s coarse fun bursts through, earthy as ever. As in the Shahnama, his ungraceful horses seemly eye the world through goggles; mouths are disarmingly askew, as though slapped on in lipstick by the court whore, and the same old jokes are replayed for a final laugh. Once again, Qadimi rumple our sense of decorum with his exhibitionist din, whose gambols evoke recollections of Greek satyrs and Callo’s Casarucco in the comedia del arte.

Also ascribable to Qadimi working for Sultan Ibrahim is this sumptuously outfitted prince—the patron himself—riding a swan-like steed, whose proportions suggest courtship to the Ugly Duckling. Despite all the finely worked gold, elegantly up-to-date caparison and grandiose tailoring, the waggy artist’s hand is unmistakable.

1. See Welch, Persian Painting, pl. 38 and figs. K, R, W.
2. See Dickson and Welch, The Houghton Shahnama, pl. 135, fig. 265; and Welch, Persian Painting, fig. R.

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80. A Puzzling Amir of Bukhara
Attributable to Shaykh-Muhammad
Ca. 1564
168 x 995 mm. (miniature only)
Private Collection

Another Uzbek visit to Mashhad occurred in 1564, towards the end of Sultan Ibrahim’s governorship. A comparison of this portrait of one of the guests with another of 1557 attributable to the same artist (no. 77) helps define the changes of style under Ibrahim’s patronage. The first picture is hard-edged and restrained, similar in line and spirit to the Camel and Goose (no. 73) of about 1555 and to the artist’s earlier pictures for the Freer manuscript (such as fig. 9). The second portrait, of a piece with Shaykh-Muhammad’s later contributions to the manuscript (fig. 10), has become excessively both in line and color. Although the sitter’s faces closely resemble each other, here the amir has been portrayed far less tactfully. Features that seemed prettishly stout are now fat to a point barely short of grossness, and the look of cynical caution in the first portrait now verges on petulance. Rhythms, too, have become wilder, as though a sudden storm (Ibrahim Mirza) had whipped a slightly choppy pond into sinuous turbulence. Ambiguities abound. Foliage seethes. Although both turbans are in relief, the impasto of the latter one exudes the energy of a Neapolitan wedding cake. The organic wriggle of the sleeves is almost intestinal.

Though now faded, the palette of the earlier portrait was disciplined in its whites, grays, subdued yellows, flesh tones, and blues. In the second, again paralleling the changes of ethos also notable in the Jami, colors range from inky blacks to blinding yellows, rich blues, mauve, and khaki green, heightened with accents of reddish orange, all inventively contained within a black ink and silver inner border. The effect is unsettling.
81. Mir Musavvir Offers a Petition
By Mir Sayyid 'Ali
Ca. 1565
120 x 110 mm. (folio size)
Lent by the Musée Guimet, Paris, on extended loan from the Musée du Louvre (16101, b)

Approximately fifteen years after painting the portrait of a young scribe for Emperor Humayun, Mir Sayyid 'Ali prepared this clever "hint" for another patron, presumably Emperor Akbar. Ourswardly it is a straightforward portrait of the artist's aged father, humbly presenting a scroll, but, in fact, the offering is a lengthy petition requesting increased favors for the painter. This portrait is the only example here in which Akbar's new synthesized Mughal style predominates. If the outline and pose stem from the artist's Tabriz period, and still echo the lessons of Aqa-Mirak, the matter-of-fact realism of the old gentleman's face, tilted spectacles, and stringy Mughal turban is new. Also new are the comparative coarseness and dullness of the pigments, which might have been intended to underscore the artist's poverty, but more likely resulted from the temporary shortage of such minerals as lapis lazuli in Akbar's greatly expanding Mughal studios.

In contrast to 'Abd us-Samad, who prospered into the 1590s at the Mughal court, Mir Sayyid 'Ali, after serving in Akbar's ateliers until about 1572, then left for Mecca, never to return. Apparently, his over-sensitive, troubled spirit was not soothed by changes of scene and patronage.

Inscribed
on scroll
Exalted be He the Lord! The petition of this long-serving, this son of mine, so faithful in his service, to these many years, is hopeful, that your favors, and will not be tainted. It is the hope, as well of your humble servant, that before too long, with the matter of precedence overlooked, he may join your entourage. God grant that the shadow of the sun be...
82. Flirtatious Lovers
Attributable to Mirza-`Ali
Ca. 1565-70
208 x 149 mm. (miniature only)
Lent by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Francis Bartlett Donation of 1912 and Picture Fund (14.595)

More extreme in stylization than the Youth with a Golden Pillow (no. 78) this later portrait group reflects the mood of Sultan Ibrahim Mirza during the bleak years when he was out of favor with the Shah, a time spent in dalliance as well as performing acts of piety, associating with goodly dervishes, and writing sad poetry. Despite the modesty of his allowance from Shah Tahmasp, Ibrahim continued to support a few artists, including Shaykh-Muhammad and probably Mirza-`Ali, though they may not have served him exclusively.

The lovers were painted under the influence of Shaykh-Muhammad as is evident in their spirit as well as in the interlacing forms of belts and sashes. She is pretty rather than distinguished, exaggeratedly tall, lean, and supple, yet voluptuous, and his swelling torso and limbs bring to mind a panther. In contrast to the elevatedly formal romantic scenes painted earlier for the Shah, the relationship between these young people is overtly sexual, recalling the amorous pairs of the Freer Jami. Peering into her eyes, he tugs her coat and offers a cup of wine, while she grips his shoulder and eyes him enticingly. However different these figures at first seem from Mirza-`Ali’s characterizations in the Quintet, their passionate natures and mannerism were already implicit, from the cone-shaped necks and undulating attenuantion, to the curving finger tips. They also bring to mind the artist’s double-page Hawking Party (no. 85).
83. *A Coquette Reading*

Attributable to Mirza-'Ali

Ca. 1570

203 x 104 mm. (miniature only)

Lent by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Income of Bartlett Fund and Special Contribution (14.993)

Snaky tufts of fur, sensually turned torsos and hips, and smouldering looks in the eye are constants in Mirza-'Ali’s later portrayals of young Safavids—qualities made palpably real by the artist’s mastery of anatomy in the third dimension. This charming vamp apparently reads a letter from her lover, while holding a golden pear reminiscent of the equally surrogate pillow hugged by her male counterpart in number 78.

Over the years, the fleshiness he had restrained in the days of the *Book of Kings* and *Quintet* increasingly emerged in Mirza-'Ali’s miniatures, due to the changing behavior patterns catalyzed at Sultan Ibrahim’s emancipated court. Subtly painterly as always, Mirza-'Ali continued to delight in applying creamy whites, as in the headdress here. Tantalizing arabesque-shaped meanders run riot in this picture, as in the broad silhouette of the light blue coat and tiny opening in the blouse.¹

1. Coomaraswamy erroneously numbers this miniature 14.594. (See Bibliography.)

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