



Newsletter Archives

Mughal School of Art

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Article of the Month – October 1999

In Indian art generally, possibly because of its predominantly religious character, the symbolic level is always the more important. The depicted surface-reality always very strongly implies some general statement. For instance, the animals and plants of the Buddhist frescoes are not just animals and plants but symbols of the whole of creation, a statement that it is animated, that it feels and suffers. The Rajasthani miniature, though historically closely related to the Mughal miniature, is even more burdened with symbolism. A painting of Krishna with herd of cows carries metaphysical and erotic overtones; a picture of lovers suggests, for example, a musical key and the season of the year.

The Mughal miniature, however, runs counter to this general trend in Indian art. It is non-symbolic; it does not imply any reality that it does not portray. Exceptions to this rule are to be found only on the fringes of the art, for instance in the early 'Hamza Nama' illustrations, which suggest to us that they are trying to make some moral statement.

Spiritual and emotional matters never occupied the first place in the Mughal scheme of things. This was filled by a sincere, if rather naive, interest in the subject matter itself. We see this characteristic for the first time in Babur's annals, in his skilful and objective accounts of Indian scenes. Akbar's third son, Daniyal, confesses candidly that for art to interest him it must deal with subjects within his own experience, with something 'that we ourselves have seen and heard'. Jahangir devotes long passages in his memoirs to the description of Indian plants and animals. But even in the representation of everyday life, the emphasis of the miniature was on objectivity, on the need for veracity, and more minute and careful study of detail.

This objectivity is the basic aesthetic standard of the Mughal miniature. It is only contravened in works outside the mainstream of the art or in those of some particularly creative artist. Ustad Mansur's unofficial sketch of three geese, for instance, reveals a warmth of feeling absent from his usual coolly objective style. However, it is worth noting, that a few masterpieces by the great portraitists display a similar insight, as well as a veracity 'worthy of the modern police dossier'.

We find, next, that the miniature tended to concentrate on objects and events rather than on action or narrative, despite its close relation to epic literature. The miniature is not epic. This is true even of the illustrations from Akbar's era. The Mughal painter is a clumsy story teller. He does not unfold a story, but rather shows an important event by, so to speak, piling up an agglomeration of nouns and limiting his use of verbs. A characteristic example of this is Basawan's illustration of the commissioning of Master Rashid-ud-din. Nothing happens in the picture, everything seems to suggest that an important event is meant to have taken place. In Jahangir's time, the static quality of the paintings and their concentration on the event becomes even more marked. State occasions, durbars, visits to hermits, all turn to stone under the gaze of Imperial official photographers. The preponderance of portraits, whether of courtiers, animals, flowers, or beauties, in itself testifies to the victory of the noun over the verb.

Another stage in the deformation of reality, unavoidable for the painter, is the reduction of three dimensional reality to the two dimensions of his medium. Here he has the choice of either disregarding the problem and confining himself to the two-dimensional plane - as, for instance, in some of the 'apabhramsha' paintings or in the early Rajput miniature - or of creating by some means an allusion of volume and space. Of course, the mere superimposition of figures in a two-dimensional picture is in itself a primitive form of illusion, as it tries to create the impression that the figures higher up in the image are further away. The technique consists of tilting the base of the composition through ninety degrees; in other words, some of the details - a brook, a swimming-pool, a carpet - are drawn from the bird's eye view, and the figures in direct view. This was the practice in the Persian miniature and in some of the mediaeval Indian illustrations.

The development of the miniature, of course, brought about changes in the stylisation's of individual features and forms - such as the nose, the eyes and the scarf. A knowledge of these changes is very useful in determining questions of period, individual style and so on. However, it is worth noting that each of these stylisation's develop in conformity, with the general rules governing the art, and no painter ignored them completely.

The Mughal painters never used color in such a way as to reduce the picture to a mere tapestry or mosaic, as do the Persian painters; nor do they beat out the robust rhythm of large colored areas, so characteristic of some of the local Indian schools. As for brush strokes they depend even more than color on the personality of the painter; the quality of the line drawing changes, therefore, perceptibly in successive periods of the miniature. Nevertheless, the whole character of Mughal art by its own importance forces the painter to suppress his handwriting and individuality of touch. For this reason, the elegant calligraphic style of the Persian miniature, and the expressive robustness of line of the Rajasthani school, is but seldom found in Mughal art.

All these rules of artistic deformation and stylisation, and perhaps even some others, form the main distinctive characteristics of the Mughal miniature. They are its 'grammar'. They have their own logic which governs both the miniatures' development and their relationships to other miniatures. It is this unique logic that makes the Mughal miniature a separate and distinctive school of painting.

This article by Nitin Kumar.

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