

## Chapter XII

### About two Mughal Miniatures\*

The best way, it has seemed to me, to commemorate the memory of Michael Meinecke was to contribute to this volume in his honor a few recently acquired impressions about a remarkable work of Islamic art. I would have liked to share these impressions with Michael in the way in which scholars of yore used to share with each other, at times through published correspondence, their almost immediate reactions to some new or newly available information. Scientific knowledge was thereby enhanced by a continuous exchange of thoughts, ideas and interpretations. But, mostly, a community of learning was established which exchanged views in writing about these ideas and thus a record was preserved of the processes and, at times, vagaries of scholarly and intellectual pursuit.

The work involved lies outside of the main concerns Michael Meinecke and I have shared over the years in terms of time, area or even method. Neither of us was particularly involved with the study of Islamic India, especially the Mughal period, and our professional involvement with history and archaeology left little room for criticism. I know how much I (and perhaps others as well) would have profited from his critical reactions to my remarks.

As many found out from press reports, one of the more memorable exhibitions of 1997 was that of the *Padshahname* of Shah Jahan belonging to the Windsor Castle library, shown first in London and then scheduled to begin a long tour of American museums. The text, only about the first third of the original, was copied in 1657–58 and is enhanced by forty-four miniatures attributed to several artists associated with the imperial court. The catalog with its several essays is a joint effort of Milo C. Beach, Ebba Koch and Wheeler Thackston,<sup>1</sup> and it contains translations of the appropriate passages of the chronicle, presentations and discussions of each miniature, a codicological introduction, and two essays, one on the manuscript's

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\* First published in *Damaszener Mitteilungen* (Festschrift Michael Meinecke), II (1999), pp. 179–83.

<sup>1</sup> M. C. Beach and E. Koch, *King of the World* (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, 1997).

relationship to Mughal historical manuscripts and the other on the miniatures themselves with a description and evaluation of what the author (Ebba Koch) calls the “hierarchical principles” of the paintings.

The published essays stressed two important points about these illustrations for a chronicle which was also a panegyric. One is that nearly every one of their formal and iconographic features – from the choice of topics to the order in which personages are represented and even [180] the portrait-like quality of so many facial and bodily characteristics – is meant to illustrate imperial power, to reproduce its hierarchical order, and to show everyone’s place within that hierarchy. In fulfilling this ambitious aim, the miniatures of the *Padshahname* are original in the specifics of what they show, but, as an ideological type, they are part of a tradition which first appeared in the art of ancient Egypt. The other point is a more subtle one. It is that the expression of this (or any other) idea required a striking language in order to be effective. The Iranicate, Timurid-imperial, mode of Mughal painting was, or so the argument seems to go, not quite able to meet the challenge of these aims. And, just as Iranian art adopted Chinese techniques and conventions in its search for a new art of representation in the fourteenth and, to a smaller degree, fifteenth centuries, so the artists of Shah Jahan’s time turned to European painting, known to them through prints and drawings, for appropriate formulas of representation.

Both of these conclusions are quite reasonable and appropriate. There is no doubt that the pageantry of the court, assisting or witnessing the ruler or his sons exercising their power in having enemies executed, presiding over weddings of relatives, hunting, conquering fortresses, or receiving visitors is shown with a wealth of details which clearly exceeds the importance of the events themselves. Just as in David’s *Coronation of Napoleon*, although obviously on a different scale, every event in this manuscript acquires additional value and meaning by being held in front of precise individuals, many of whom can still be identified today, all of whom could be identified at the time of the event. But, in line with a wonderful paradox inherent to all arts intimating the representation of specific events, whenever the representation of immanent specificity is of sufficiently high quality, it loses its immanence, its relationship to its subject fades away, and it becomes a painting from which successive generations can derive visual pleasure and enlightenment without quite knowing what it was about. It is, thus, possible, probably even necessary, to extend a classical and perfectly justified iconographic and ideological explanation of a group of miniatures into an interpretation of these images no longer as illustrations of given topics or of ideas but as feasts for the eye, as aesthetic involvements. The point becomes even more telling when one considers that the value and the impact of an ideologically charged message differ considerably when they are expressed in manuscripts which could not be seen by more than two people at any one time rather than on walls available to all.

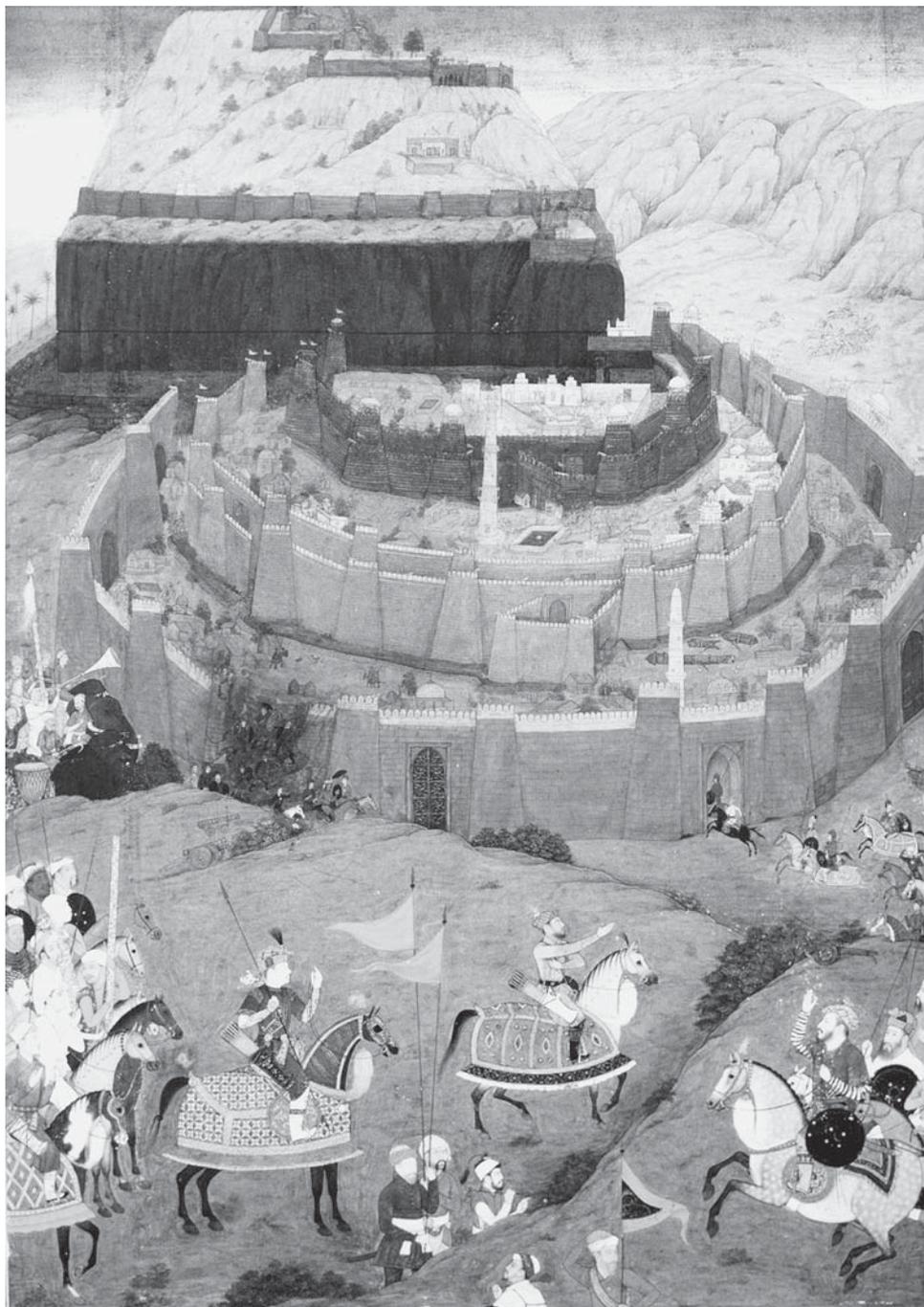
Similarly, it is indeed true that all sorts of technical devices of European origin were incorporated into the canvas of traditional Iranicate Mughal painting and that many of them were woven so artfully that they no longer appear as artificial borrowings but as integral parts of the language used by the painters. These are not hybrid paintings, but learned compositions in which very different artifices were used to make visual effects. In other words, while it is proper and correct to point out the sophisticated integration of European techniques of representing man or space, this conclusion requires further elaboration on the impact these and other devices had on the viewer in the past and, of course, today.

I will elaborate on these and other observations around two miniatures. Each one belongs to a set of comparable ones within the manuscript. The first one (Fig. 1) is supposed to represent the siege, in fact the conquest, of Dawlatabad (fol. 144, fig. 34 in the catalog). It is dominated by the striking picture of a city with three rings of walls on the lower level, then a moat and a higher city in two walled sections towering over the lower city. There are seven other representations of cities in landscapes, all but two of them shown in the process of being conquered, and all are different from each other. They are: fol. 92B, the fort of Dharur, fig. 15 in the catalog; fol. 102B, the siege of Qandahar, fig. 18; fol. 117, taking of Fort Hoogly, fig. 20; fol. 166B, a royal procession with an interesting depiction of a city in the background, fig. 34; fol. 174, capture [181] of Orchha, fig. 35; fol. 204B, surrender of Udjir, fig. 40; fols 205B–206, visit to the shrine of Khwaja Mu'inaddin Chishti at Ajmeer, figs 41–42.

My second example (Fig. 2) is a reception scene (fol. 192B, fig. 37), in this instance of Jahangir receiving his son, Prince Khurram. Eleven other images (figs 5, 8–9, 12–13, 14, 17, 19, 32, 38, 39, 43, 44) are also reception scenes and all but three of them are constructed in the same manner as the one I have chosen: an upper level with the ruler, an attendant and the principal co-actor, in this instance Prince Khurram; a lower level with courtiers and attendants arranged in several different kinds of rows. These scenes are all divided vertically into three parts usually separated by architectural devices, with the ruler dominating or occupying alone the central section.

Details in both images can be explained in terms of whatever information is provided by the text surrounding them or by otherwise existing accounts of the events involved. The writers of the catalog have dealt quite intelligently and imaginatively with most such iconographic issues of relating an image to whatever it is supposed to have represented. But I would like to argue that these two miniatures, like most of the other ones in the manuscript, raise a much more curious question with significant theoretical ramifications: what is the exact nature of the truth or verisimilitude which is proposed by the painters?

Let us look carefully at the “Siege of Dawlatabad” (Fig. 2). Its major key of clearly delineated shapes and colors includes two elements. One is a town



1 *Padshahname*:  
The siege of  
Dawlatabad, Ex.  
Cat. 31



2 *Padshahname*:  
Jahangir receives  
Prince Khurram,  
Ex. Cat. 37

in two sections, one above the other, with heavy fortifications on which many red imperial flags signal possession, and with a smattering of smaller buildings inside. The main ones are highlighted in sharper and clearer colors, as though a spotlight has been directed at them. They seem to be official or privileged places like mosques whose minarets alone are depicted,<sup>2</sup> water reservoirs, a walled garden which could be part of a palace, a pavilion

<sup>2</sup> It is just possible that these were not attached to mosques but signposts in cities to be seen from afar. A separate study should be devoted to the representation of architecture in this manuscript.

within an enclosure on the highest point of the city, a cluster of houses (?), and a smattering of other complexes whose meanings are not very clear. But there is a second series of buildings, barely outlined and almost merging with the brown-colored ground. Most of these are houses, sometimes with a tree next to them. One, in the upper city, may be a shrine with a platform in front of a domed building. Yet, there are, all together, very few houses in the city.

Together with buildings, the other major component of the miniature consists in people. There are many colorful riders and a few walking standard-bearers arranged in two groups facing each other in the front of the picture and, then, two smaller colorful groups actually attacking or entering the city, one through a gate, the other one after a successful explosion had destroyed parts of the wall. In the first group, three leaders are gesturing toward each other with arms raised in dramatic poses going back to ancient Egyptian and Assyrian art. No colorful personage appears inside the walls, where, however, several groups of artfully sketched riders and foot-soldiers (?) are shown patrolling an apparently empty city, with one dead inhabitant lying on the ground. There are no soldiers in the uppermost part of the city, but a band of horsemen is faintly visible on the upper right, either pursuing some enemy riders away or simply practicing their horsemanship.

It is obvious that the character of the city, the specifics of the activities carried out in or around it, and the gestures of the personages in front depict a concrete event, probably the one [182] that occurred in June 1633, when Dawlatabad was taken for the Mughal emperor. But, as Milo Beach and Ebba Koch have shown, the painter telescoped several separate occurrences into one picture. This sort of conflation is common enough in illustrations whose purpose is relatively rarely to relate an exact sequence of events, but, much more frequently, to recall the circumstances and peculiarities of that event. And, also in line with observations that could be made in many other artistic traditions, certain features are highlighted to ensure their recognition and, by extension, the recognition of an event's singularity. Such are the peculiar topography of the city, which differs from the other six representations of cities in the manuscript, the surprise of the explosion, and the differences in physical features of the three main protagonists saluting each other.

But why this contrast between two different degrees of visibility in the representation of people and buildings, when that difference does not seem to be inspired by the text or by important iconographic variables?<sup>3</sup> Two answers, compatible with each other, can be proposed. One is, in part, iconographic and follows the hierarchical principle developed for the miniatures by Ebba Koch. It is that the main topic, the success of a group of

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<sup>3</sup> Iconographic distinctions can explain a similar contrast on fol. 204B, pl. 40, where an army about to surrender is barely visible behind the first set of walls and where a whole city is sketched out in the back, perhaps suggesting remoteness in space.

military leaders in the name of the ruler, can only make sense if its expression is contrasted with the rest of the world staying in shadows. The other answer is perceptual in that an image requires means of access into all parts of its surface. This access can only be achieved by inviting the viewer into details and, as a result, into total immersion within the picture. What is involved here is a double visual operation. One deals with broad strokes of contrasts and of moods, the other with an almost infinite breakdown into independent parts, each of which is an image in its own right. The viewer is thus expected to operate, simultaneously or sequentially, at two separate levels, one handling the general impact of a miniature and the other the mass of its details.

My second example (Fig. 2) is, at first glance, of a totally different kind. It is a two-dimensional representation of a *darbar*, a reception at which a specific event, although in this case apparently one which cannot be identified with certainty, takes place: Jahangir receiving his son Prince Khurram who offered his father a fancy pearl. The structure of the image is typical of many other such images and, just as in my first example, there is a contrast between the colorful highlighting and precision of personages and the nearly monochrome, although quite rich in details, architectural background with the striking figures of a shaykh and angels almost merging, like ghosts, into the turquoise background. As Ebba Koch correctly pointed out, the emphasis on the ruler is here greater than elsewhere. Father and son are frozen in the expression of gestures of respect and acceptance, and the assembly of courtiers, many of whom can still be identified, has been squeezed into less space than in most other miniatures. As in many of the latter, there is something mesmerizing about the collection of courtiers, all different from each other, with minimal gestures of the hands restricted to only three of them, all molded into a sort of eternal profile (with five out of twenty-two in three-quarters view). Just as in a parlour game, one knows that in a second they will all move, but in the precise moment of representation they have just assembled for a photo opportunity.

The contrast between overall impact and details appears in this image in the individuality of the faces and clothes of the personages, drawing the attention of the viewer away from the overall [183] point of the picture, yet always returning his gaze to it. In this respect, although with different components and in a very different key, the perception of this miniature is comparable to what we have observed in the "Siege of Dawlatabad." The impact of the whole miniature is always contrasted with the richness of its details.

But one striking detail opens up another avenue for critical thought. It is the figure at the lower left which, together with its neighbor, does not seem to participate in the central ceremony. The existence of such individuals creating some sort of visual coherence within groups is already encountered in fourteenth-century painting in Iran and in Italy, whenever large groups of identical personages (courtiers, soldiers, saints, or angels) surround some

major scene or event. In the case of our manuscript, not only do these personages face away from the rest of the crowd, but one of them is shown with a silly grin, in total contrast to the formulaic seriousness of everyone else. Why? There could have been a specific reference to something that happened then and which will probably never be known. It could also be the introduction into the picture of someone who did not belong to the assembled crowd, the artist for instance, although such instances which do exist are not usually that obvious. The only certain explanation is that this figure was meant to break the mummified standard for all other personages and, therefore, to invite the viewer to go back to them, to seek in them that which can make them alive, that can be made to move. A few visible gestures of hands and a few potential glances can suddenly become filled with thought or with emotion and, just as in a museum of life-size wax figurines, artificial bodies become real ones once something triggers their perception as such.

It is this intimation of reality through the device of a charged detail, not through the artfulness of the composition, that characterizes most of the paintings of this manuscript. Nearly all of its miniatures are invitations to disappear into the depth of their minute references in order to return to the whole and to see it better. This dialogue between part and whole, between detail and ensemble, engages the viewer from two directions and, even if the final results of visual appreciation are the same, the processes of comprehension are different.<sup>4</sup> In order to understand the ways involved and the history of this approach to the art of painting, many more images need to be examined and discussed.

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<sup>4</sup> In much of my reasoning, I was influenced by reading Daniel Arasse, *Le Détail* (1992).