

THE ART OF BOOK ILLUMINATION AND ITS DEVELOPMENT DURING THE MUGHAL PERIOD

By
Ali Nawaz Phulpoto

In the early Islamic period the art of illumination arose as a supplementary to the art of calligraphy, most often the calligrapher would pass copy of manuscript to an illuminator for its embellishment in gold ink and bright colours. The art of illumination though ancient, was restricted to manuscripts. It flourished in Middle East, Central Asia and India. Muslims practiced this art and developed it to the great heights of excellence at different centres in the Muslim World.

The earliest illuminated manuscript was the Quran as of all the books, the Quran was the most important. Although the sacred Quranic text was first written without embellishment of any kind, but during the Khilafat period illuminated chapter headings and certain kinds of liturgical marginal ornaments were added to it. The ultimate approval of ornamental decorations resulted in the production of multiple copies of Quran with beautiful decorations. According to a popular Persian tradition Hazrat Ali (R.A), the Prophet's son-in-law was the first who illuminated Holy Quran and many people of high rank in succeeding centuries undertook the same pious task, satisfying thereby their taste for rich display, and adding apparently, to their prestige.¹

Generally speaking about the art of book we include calligraphy (beautiful writing) illumination (embellishment with design work in gold and bright colours) illustration (figural paintings) and binding (the adornment of the covers to protect leaves).

Artistically, the most important form of the book illumination include the ornamentation of the first folios, recto and verso (Shamsa, Sarlah, Unwan, Hashia), chapter headings, text, borders and last folio (colophon).

In the early Muslim period Baghdad School is noted for book art. It played a leading role. Master minds, like Ibn Muqla (886-940), Ibn Bawwab (991-1032) and Yaqut-al-Mustasemi (1221-1268) excelled in the art of lettering. The Caliph Mamun-al-Rashid (813-833), son of Harun-al-Rashid, patronized scholars, calligraphers, and book il-

luminators who produced manuscripts of high standard embellished in gold and bright colours.²

The broad line of the development of book illumination was as follows:

The early illuminated manuscripts consisted of Quranic texts with the decoration of simple geometric patterns often with plaited or knotted shapes with a large square or rectangle to which it was attached, on the right or left marginal medallion marks and circular leaf like a device made up of foliage were used. Later on new forms of book decoration developed during the tenth century onwards became extremely elaborate.

Islam was introduced in the Indo-Pak subcontinent in the beginning of the 8th century with the conquest of Sindh by the Arabs. During the ensuing centuries, several Muslim dynasties controlled various regions of India and established their courts in Delhi, Gujrat and Sindh. Muslim rulers introduced the tradition of court patronage in art, architecture and learning and established court studios of book production. But their efforts seem partly when compared with the court studio established by the Mughals.

During the Mughal period (1526-1707) the art of book reached its climax. Zahir-ad Din Muhammad Babur (1526-1530) the founder of Mughal empire, and his successors were great patrons of art. We know from the memoirs of Babur that he admired the works of art particularly the paintings of Bihzad. He collected Herat School Paintings from his ancestors the Timurids and took these to India.

We know from the biography of Humayun (1530-1556) written by his sister, that he also took interest in painting while his stay in Iran, which had considerable impact on the development of Mughal School. When Humayun recaptured Delhi and Agra with the help of Safavids, he invited two renowned artists Mir Sayyid Ali from Tabriz and Abdus Samad from Shiraz at his court to establish studio on the pattern of Safavids. These two artists are commonly known as the founder of Mughal School.

After Humayun's death the reign of Akbar (1556-1605) was the golden period of India. The emperor had special liking for Painting (Musavviri) and book illumination even from his young age.

After completion of his newly built capital at Fatchpur Sikri in

1569, he established imperial studio comprising more than one hundred artists (Musavvirs) and illuminators from all over the country to work under the supervision of Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad.

According to Manohar Kaul, the author of *Trends in Indian Painting*, "the school of book painting already existed in western India notably in Gujrat, the home of the Jaina School. Many Libraries and private collections have preserved a good number of Jaina illuminated manuscripts."³ Thus the artists in book painting were to be found all over India. During the formation of Mughal School these local artists were employed in the imperial studio where they specialised in various branches of book painting such as calligraphy, marginal decoration, illumination and binding. Many books were commissioned, documentation of contemporary events were illustrated, single-page scenes, animal studies and portraits were painted.

In 1585 Akbar left the city of Fatehpur Sikri and for the remaining twenty years of his reign he made his Head-Quarters principally at Lahore. It is recorded that in his new capital in Punjab the emperor employed some of his personal staff artists to work at Lahore Studio.

Due to Akbar's personal interest, in art and learning, Lahore became the central place where many calligraphers, illuminators and painters produced illustrated copies of manuscripts under official patronage. Some of the works such as *Darab-nama*, *Tarikh-e-Alfi*, *Divan Hafiz*, *Yousif-Zulekha* and *Khamsa-Nizami* were written and illustrated in Lahore.

Sindh also played very important role in producing valuable manuscripts. There are historical references, that "Thatta was contemporary to the Timurids of Herat. With the fall of Herat and the subsequent rise of the Safavids in Iran many eminent calligraphers, and illuminators migrated to Sindh and were held in high esteem by the rulers and Princes of Thatta."⁴

It is true that during the rule of the Sammas, the Arghuns, the Tarkhans and the Mughals, these developed many public as well as private libraries in the city of Thatta. As we know it was the tradition that in each library there worked calligraphers, painters, illuminators and book binders. M.A. Ghafur has mentioned in his book, "Calligraphers of Thatta", "when Sind was conquered by Abdur Rahim, Khan-i-Khana, Shuja Thattavi was presented to him. Khan-i-Khana

appreciated his art work and promoted him to the post of Librarian.⁵ This was the period when Mughal miniatures and book illumination reached its maturity and influenced its provincial centers. We have various accounts by European travellers who had visited Sindh "that the palaces built during the Mughal Governor Mirza Ghazi Beg Tarkhan in Thatta were decorated with wall paintings in the style of Agra and Lahore."⁶ During the Mughal rule in Sindh, a good number of calligraphers and illuminators practiced their art at Thatta. Among them Sayyid Ali and Sheikh Muhammad stand out prominently. An important illustrated manuscript of the romance of Sayfal-Maluk wa-Badi al-Jamal of Kalhora period is another example that shows the continuity of book painting and illumination in Sindh.⁷

Jahangir (1605-27) developed different taste than his father Akbar. He favoured single page paintings which were compiled in (Muraqas) albums, portraiture and hunting scenes were favourite subjects of his time. Special study of flowers and animals shows his great love for nature. Jahangir made long stay at Lahore where he established his painting studio and Library. During the rule of Jahangir new forms of marginal decorations were added. Artists like Mansur and Balchand worked on the illuminations of margins (Hashias). Landscapes with animals and human beings were often depicted in different tints of gold. Some paintings show European influence as in figures containing picture of Virgin and Child also depict portraits wearing European dresses.

Under the succeeding rule of Shah Jahan the art of book illumination began to decline, because of his personal interest in architecture. Though he maintained his court studio at Delhi but the quality of painting and illumination could not retain its standard. During the period of Aurangzeb, Mughal School did not receive personal encouragement from the ruler. This sort of attitude brought an end to this noble art.

The art of book illumination developed during the Mughal rule is unsurpassed. It was Akbar who first set up Libraries and this practice was kept by his successors. The great Library of the Mughals with its 24,000 manuscripts, many of them illuminated was sacked by Afghan Nadir Shah in 1739. And not only this but the valuable Libraries of royal families, Noble citizens and Nawabs were looted away or destroyed by outsiders. Today we find the fragments of Mughal libraries scattered all

over the world. Regarding the book illumination process we do not know exactly what methods were used for the teaching of illuminators (Mudhahhibs) and how they specialised in this art. It is assumed that the students first studied all the processes involved in the production of illuminated manuscripts and only then began to specialise.

The art of illumination takes a fairly wide variety of forms based on its lay-out and ornamentation. Some of these I would like to describe here.

During the middle of the 15th century we find the illuminators specialising only in outlining the text (Jadval or Khat) in Indian ink and bright colours and later on new variations were introduced such as:

Jarah: The process in which real pearls and precious stone were applied to the ornaments and draperies for embellishment.

Gubara: finely powdered gold was used in design.

Zar-negari: Art by which chapter headings were decorated in liquid gold.

Zar-afshan: Gold spraying, gold dust was used to cover background and margins.

Abri Sazi: The decoration consisted of cloud like designs created in different colours.

Minakari: In this type of illumination the total effect was achieved like imitations of enamelling in gold or silver.

Tashi: Animal and plants were used for decoration.

Ghalamkar: Stencil painting process was applied to create special effect in illumination.

References:

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