

Mahavihara Master

Active in the early 12th century, in Bengal

This master painter of the Pala-era Buddhist monastic tradition is known from one extant palm-leaf manuscript, now shared between New York and Lhasa. The illustrated manuscript is a deluxe edition of the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra* (Perfection of Wisdom), a Mahayanist text of profound importance to the development of esoteric Buddhist practice. The paintings that accompany this text display not only highly sophisticated painting skills but also such a sensitivity and empathy for the subject matter that one cannot avoid assuming the artist was a monk, deeply versed in the text he was engaged to illustrate. This pious artistic venture, to fulfill a royal commission, was probably undertaken in the scriptorium of one of the great monasteries (*mahaviharas*) of eastern India at the height of Buddhist activity there. The colophon leaf is preserved in Lhasa and although providing no clue about place or date of production, does identify the edition as “the pious gift of the queen Vihunadevi.”¹ As this queen is otherwise unknown, we have no means of constructing a provenance or reign date for her. Nevertheless, naming her as the donor fits a well-established pattern of female royal patrons of Buddhist religious art.

The Mahavihara Master displays a practiced ease combined with astute skill and sensitivity, resulting in miniature paintings of dazzling dexterity. His fluid lines and schematized color palette capture the sensuous flexing of the body profiles. The body colors are iconographically prescribed, as is the theatrical use of symbolic gestures (*mudras*). The subjects are standard, Buddhist saviors performing acts of charity and compassion: Bodhisattvas and Taras granting boons (No. 2: Green Tara) and expounding the *dharm*a (No. 1: Avalokitesvara preaching), and Kurukulla protecting the faithful. The choices underscore the essentially talismanic function of these painting, to extend protection to both the text they accompany and those who read it.

There is evidence, both in the text and beyond, that the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita Sutra* book became the focus of a cult of veneration and hence, worthy of extravagant embellishment. Certainly, these painted folios, among the oldest surviving masterworks of the Indian tradition, are appropriate to the task. The Mahavihara Master successfully miniaturized compositions originated for large-scale mural painting programs into a book format averaging 2½ by 3 inches (6.4 x 7.6 cm). That they convey the essence of the Buddhist *dharm*a with grace, gravitas, and a sense of monumentality is all the more remarkable.

1
Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara
 expounding the *dharm*a to a devotee:
 folio from a *Ashtasahasrika*
Prajnaparamita Sutra manuscript
 Bengal, eastern India or Bangladesh,
 Pala period, early 12th century
 Opaque watercolor on palm-leaf,
 2¾ x 16½ in. (7 x 41.9 cm)
 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
 Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 2001
 (2001.445.f)

The enthroned Avalokitesvara, bodhisattva of compassion, who is crowned, bejeweled, and framed by two white lotus blooms, sits in a temple shrine setting with *bhadra*-style superstructure of the Pala style. His hands held in double *vitarkamudra* preach the Perfection of Wisdom sutra to the female devotee who looks up in rapture at her savior. In this scene of powerful humanist sentiment, the psychological drama follows textual prescriptions describing how devotees should gaze on the deity. The Buddha essence (*dhatu*) is evoked by the depiction of a stupa, embodying the presence of both the Buddha relics and Buddha teachings.





10

Assad ibn Kariba launches a night attack on the camp of Malik Iraj: folio from a *Hanzanama* series

Delhi-Fatehpur Sikri, ca. 1570

Inscribed: captioned in Persian, written in nasta'liq script "Asad attacks Iraj at night and assails [his army] with arrows"

Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on cotton cloth, mounted on paper, 27 x 21¼ in. (68.6 x 54 cm)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1918 (18.44.1)

Published: Glück and Diez, *Die Kunst des Islam* (1925), fig. 38; Dimand, "Several Illustrations from the Dastan-I Amir Hamza in American Collections" (1948), p. 7; Lukens, *Islamic Art* (1965), pp. 44–45, fig. 59; Grube, *The Classical Style in Islamic Painting* (1968), fig. 94; Kossak, *Indian Court Painting* (1997), no. 8; Seyller et al., *Adventures of Hamza* (2002), no. 82

Asad ibn Kariba, having just presided over a slaughter of the troops of the Zoroastrian Malik Iraj, is seen in the foreground on a white horse as he leads his troops away to safety in the cover of darkness. The composition is complex; the intercepting triangular and conical forms of the encampment evoke the chaos of battle, and figures battling in close quarters occupy all intermediate spaces. Beyond, the crenulated wall of the fort emerges from the rocky landscape below. The hand of Basawan is evident in the surging rock formations at upper left and the densely foliated trees, as a comparison with those motifs in his *Khamsa of Amir Khusrau Dihlavi* manuscript page clearly demonstrates (No. 12).





28
Study of St. John the Evangelist,
 adapted from Durer's *Crucifixion*
 engraving of 1511

Mughal court, probably at Allahabad, dated 1600–01
 Inscribed: "Drawn by Abu'l Hasan son of Riza,
 disciple of Shah Salim. Done at the age of
 thirteen" and dated 1 April 1009
 Brush drawn ink on paper, 3¹⁵/₁₆ x 1¹³/₁₆ in.
 (10 x 4.6 cm)

The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Gift of Gerald
 Reitlinger, 1978 (EA 1978.2597)

Published: Ashton, *The Art of India and Pakistan*
 (1950), no. 665; Beach, "The Mughal Painter
 Abu'l Hasan and Some English Sources for his
 Style" (1980), fig. 13; Rogers, *Mughal Miniatures*
 (1993), pl. 49; Topsisfield, *Indian Paintings from*
Oxford Collections (1994), pl. 8

This sensitive study was drawn by the thirteen-year-old son of Aqa Riza. The young artist certainly was working directly from the Durer original rather than from some Mughal intermediary version. He produced a sensitive and accurate interpretation of the Durer, with finely judged shaded modeling to give volume and form to the figure. The saint's anguish, seen in his intense facial expression and tightly clasped hands, reveals a psychological insight that soon would make Abu'l Hasan the foremost portrait painter of Jahangir's reign.



FIGURE X.
 Crucifixion, from
 The Small Engraved
 Passion, by Albrecht
 Dürer, Nuremberg,
 engraving dated 1511.
 The Metropolitan
 Museum of Art, New
 York, Fletcher Fund,
 1919 (19.73.13)

29
Celebrations at the accession of
Jahangir: page from a *Jahangirnama*
manuscript; St. Petersburg Album

Mughal court at Ajmer or Agra, ca. 1615–18
 Inscribed: "By the worthless of the humble,
 Abu'l Hasan, Jahangir Shahi"
 Opaque watercolor and gold on paper; painting:
 14⁷/₈ x 8¹¹/₁₆ in. (37.8 x 22 cm)

Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Oriental
 Studies, St. Petersburg (Ms. E-14, fol. 10)

Published: Ivanova et al., *Al'bom indioskikh i*
persidskikh miniatiur XVI–XVIII vv. (1962), no. 7;
 Beach, "The Mughal Painter Abu'l Hasan and
 Some English Sources for his Style" (1980), fig. 23

The orientation of this composition is to the right, indicating that this was the left half of a double-page composition. The setting of the Red Fort at Agra is evoked by the splendid pink sandstone gateway through which an elephant emerges in a dramatic frontal view and mounted by a mahout dressed in a brilliant yellow *jama* and beating kettledrums. This mélange of figures of the court, jostled together seemingly irrespective of rank, allows Abu'l Hasan to display his skills at portraiture to the fullest. Intermingled in this crowd are a number of foreigners, presumably diplomats, including at lower right, a European who is very probably Sir Thomas Roe, Ambassador to King James I of England, and above the red railing, a balding figure, likely Roe's cleric Edward Perry.¹ A number of the portrait studies of Mughal courtiers can be traced to earlier works, from which they have been "borrowed."

