

Miskina, Sarwan and Bhura, *Akbarnama: Mines exploding during the siege of Chitor (Mughal)* c.1590-95

95



Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Key facts:

Artists: composition by Miskina; colours and details painted by Sarwan and Bhura

Date: circa 1590-95

Medium: opaque watercolour and gold on paper

Dimensions: 33 x 18.8 cm

Source: this belongs to a presentation copy of the *Akbarnama*, the history of the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar (1542-1605). The Persian text of this copy has 116 paintings done by Akbar's artists.

Location: Victoria and Albert Museum, London (IS.2:66-1896 and IS.2:67-1896)

1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter: The four-month siege to capture the fort of Chitor began in October 1567. It was a key part of Akbar's campaign against the Hindu ruler of the province of Mewar in Rajasthan, who had refused to make friendly alliances with the emperor through marriage, unlike his Rajput neighbours. The fort was seen as impregnable, and a Mughal victory here would deter future resistance. In this painting, Mughal sappers prepare covered paths and lay mines to protect the advancing army. Akbar directs their work. He is identifiable by the feather in his turban: this is an emblem of royalty, as is the flywhisk held by the attendant behind him. The text explains that the placing of the mines had been done against his advice. These exploded when the invading Mughal army rode over them, and some of Akbar's best generals were blown up.

Composition: The scene is shown in a stylised, not realistic, manner. The huge fort and its steep walls are shown schematically, and the participants in the battle in general convey emotion through gestures, rather than facial expression. In a convention influenced by Iranian painting, some figures are cut off by the borders of the painting. The naturalism of the animals, and the way in which the trees are depicted, comes from Hindustani traditions. Some details reflect contemporary life: the way in which the labourers are constructing the fortified channels to protect the workers laying mines; the depiction of the cannon; the forms of weapons (including Akbar's dagger tucked into his sash), arms and armour, and styles of clothing.

Lines from the Persian narrative are on the right-hand page. The script reads from right to left, and the narrative continues on the back of the left-hand page. The Persian inscription in red ink beneath the painting identifies the artists.

The artists: Most of the paintings in this manuscript were done by two artists. The senior artist drew the composition (*tarh*), in this case over two pages. The 'work' (*amal*), referring to the process of painting over Miskina's drawn outlines, was done on the right-hand page by Sarwan and on the left by Bhura.

Colour: Analysis has shown a range of colours: vermilion, red lead, indigo, lapis lazuli (an expensive material), white lead, yellow ochre, and black from carbon. 'Indian yellow', or peori, is said to come from cows fed on mango leaves who then produced deep-coloured urine. This was reduced over a fire, with the precipitate moulded into balls and dried. Gold was also lavishly used in the *Akbarnama*. All these pigments were finely ground, and mixed with water and gum Arabic to bind them. When using them, the artists put each colour in a fresh-water mussel shell and used brushes made of squirrel hair.

Space and depth: European-style perspective is alien to the Iranian and Hindustani traditions of highly stylised painting. By the time the *Akbarnama* was being written, Western art had appeared at court, brought by Jesuit missionaries who hoped to convert the emperor to Christianity. Akbar's profound interest in other religions, and in art, meant that he and his painters studied with great care these paintings and prints. European conventions and motifs then began to seep into Mughal painting. Here, there is an impression of depth in the composition, though it does not follow any scientific rules of perspective. The three cannons add directional impact.

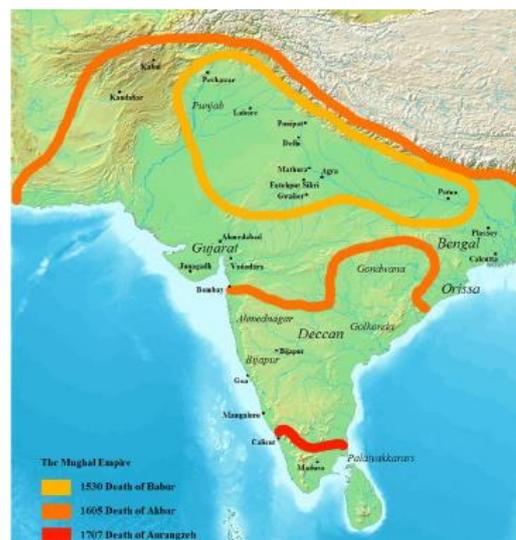
2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

The Mughal empire was founded in 1526 when the Muslim prince Babur invaded Hindustan (northern India) from Central Asia and defeated the Sultan of Delhi. He and his successors belonged to a wider Iranian cultural world, and their primary language was Persian. The name by which they are now known is the Persian word for 'Mongol' – a branch of the family was descended from the Mongol (or Mongolian) ruler Chinghiz (or Genghis) Khan. By the time the *Akbarnama* was written, Persian had been adopted as the official administrative language of Akbar's vast empire which had many different regional languages.

Akbar was the third Mughal emperor and inherited the throne at the age of 13, following the sudden death of his father, Humayun. He rapidly expanded Mughal territory. He was a Muslim, ruling a population with a huge Hindu majority as well as followers of other religious paths, and fostered religious tolerance. Akbar reigned until 1605, making him almost exactly the contemporary of Queen Elizabeth I of England and Ireland.

At his death, the Mughal empire stretched across most of the Indian subcontinent north of the Godavari River, including present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Political stability combined with efficient administration made the empire extremely wealthy.

Akbar was a prolific patron of the arts in general, and of the art of the book in particular. His library contained more than 24,000 volumes written in Sanskrit, Persian, Greek and Arabic. He commissioned many new manuscripts, written in Persian and illustrated by his artists. Paradoxically, he was unable to read and write, and modern scholars have suggested he was dyslexic.



Map with orange borders indicating the extent of the Mughal empire during Akbar's reign. Digital image courtesy of queryhome.com

He learned the content of his books by having them read out to him, and his excellent memory combined with curiosity meant that his knowledge was extremely wide-ranging.

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

From the 1560s, Hindu and Muslim painters from various regions across the Indian subcontinent were taken into royal service. They worked under the direction of two highly skilled Iranian artists brought to Hindustan by Akbar's father. Together, they created a new and distinctive Mughal style. Paintings had the high viewpoint and vertical format of Iranian book painting, while the ways in which trees were painted, and the naturalism with which animals were depicted, in the main came from Hindustani traditions. The artists worked in the royal Ketabkhana, or 'House of Books', where manuscripts were stored as well as created.

They made their own pigments, mostly from minerals, and their own brushes from fine squirrel hairs, and worked near illuminators, calligraphers and bookbinders. The composition of each painting was drawn by the principal artist with charcoal or thin black ink applied with either a brush or pen on paper that was prepared by applications of sizing and burnishing. Layers of colour were then applied by junior artists, and the paper was burnished from the back between each application by being placed face down on a smooth slab of stone or glass.

Little is known about Miskina (whose name is sometimes also written 'Miskin') other than that he contributed to other major manuscripts for Akbar, and nothing at all about Sarwan and Bhura.

4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

The *Akbarnama* was commissioned in 1589 by the emperor Akbar as the official chronicle of his reign, and written by the scholar Abu'l Fazl between 1590 and 1596. Many copies were made, though probably few were illustrated. The manuscript to which this page belongs describes events of 1560 to 1577. The artists are identified in contemporary inscriptions beneath each painting and are all known to have worked in the royal ateliers. This almost certainly confirms that the V&A manuscript was intended to be the presentation copy for the emperor. The text breaks off abruptly and this copy was never finished for reasons we do not know.

After Akbar's death in 1605, the V&A manuscript was inherited by his son Jahangir (r. 1605-1627), and then by Jahangir's own son and successor, Shah Jahan (r. 1628-1658). The Victoria and Albert Museum bought it in 1896 from Mrs Frances Clarke, the widow of Major-General John Clarke who acquired it in India while serving as Commissioner of Oudh between 1858 and 1862. The importance of the manuscript means that almost every book on Mughal art includes at least one reproduction of

a painting from the V&A manuscript. The accuracy of the original text has made it a primary source for the history of Akbar's reign to this day.

FURTHER READING AND LINKS

- 'The Art of the Mughals before 1600', Heilebrunn timeline of art history:
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mugh/hd_mugh.htm
- Susan Stronge, *Painting for the Mughal Emperor. The Art of the Book 1560-1650*, V&A Publications, 2002
- GC Calza (ed), 'Akbar: The Great Emperor of India', Fondazione Roma Museo 2013
- Anne Murphy, 'The Mughal Court Paintings' (Asia Society) <http://asiasociety.org/mughal-court-paintings>
- Michael Wheeler, 'Mounting of leaves from the *Akbarnama*' Conservation Journal July 1997, Issue 24
- Anita Chowdhry, *The Book of Gold. Making and using Shell Gold. An Artist's Resource Book* [ebook]
- Kunal Basu, *The Miniaturist*, Penguin Books India, 2003. A novel about Mughal artists in Akbar's atelier
- J. Say Seck Leong, 'Battle for Chitor: Storming the Last Hindu Fortress in 1567'
<http://www.historynet.com/battle-for-chitor-storming-the-last-hindu-fortress-in-1567.htm>