Recognized as one of the masterpieces of early Mughal painting, the manuscript of the *Anvār-i Suhaylī* (Lights of Canopus) now in the Library of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) is the focal point of this essay. The great beauty, elegance, and style of its twenty-seven illustrations have attracted the attention of many scholars of Islamic art. Reputed to embody the fusion of Persianate style with local indigenous Indic motifs, all twenty-seven paintings are dated by art historians, in accordance with the manuscript’s colophon, to 978 (1570). A careful inspection of the SOAS paintings, however, yields a somewhat different chronology for the manuscript and its illustrations and by extension forces us to reevaluate the conventional narrative of early-Akbar-period painting. These miniatures also invite a reassessment of the history not only of this book but also, more generally, of illustrated manuscripts in sixteenth-century Central Asia, Iran, and Mughal India; they carry broad implications with respect to style, aesthetic criteria, cultural geography, and the importance of the hand-written word—i.e., the conscious preference for hand-copied, rather than printed, manuscripts.

Scrutinizing paintings for small optical units and engaging in a detailed study of each element in every painting constitutes the core of the methodology that I have been developing and practicing together with Oleg Grabar since our first joint project. The underlying theory holds that nothing in a painting is redundant or accidental; its presence is the result of conscious decisions made by the artist or artists. A meticulous identification and understanding of the functionality of all visual features in any illustration will reveal the processes by which artists formulated specific approaches to their work. This method allows us to reconstruct a history for illustrated manuscripts, and the present essay is a further step in this reconstruction.

After presenting the SOAS *Anvār-i Suhaylī*, its distinctive and unusual characteristics, and the questions these characteristics pose, I will link this codex to similar books that may shed light on it and explain its peculiarity. Next I will demonstrate the existence of two different styles in the paintings, identify the origin of these styles, and establish a new chronology and history for the manuscript as a whole. Ultimately, I will discuss these ideas in the broader context of the art of the book and consider their implications for our understanding of early-Akbar-period painting.

The stories of the *Anvār-i Suhaylī* were written by Kamal al-Din Husayn ibn Ali al-Vā’īz, known also as Kashīfī, by the end of the fifteenth or early sixteenth century, probably in Timurid Herat. The work itself is dedicated to Amir Suhayli (hence its title), who commissioned Kashīfī to rewrite, in up-to-date language, the stories of *Kalīla wa Dimna*. These fables, involving humans and animals, often have surprising and somewhat harsh conclusions and morals. In this essay I will not deal with the content of these stories, as fascinating as they are, or with their transformation into images, but rather will examine the physicality of the book and the style and layout of the paintings, which will serve as a key for understanding this manuscript and the early period of Mughal painting.

Scholars have tended to approach the twenty-seven miniature paintings in the SOAS *Anvār-i Suhaylī* as a homogeneous group and to classify them as still retaining strong Persian characteristics with respect to their style, composition, and palette. Such a categorization conforms only superficially with the master narrative regarding the birth of Mughal painting, according to which this art was developed under the close guidance and supervision of two Safavid painters, Mir Sayyid ‘Ali and ‘Abd al-Samad, who were brought to the Mughal court by Humayun, and to whom the establishment of the Mughal atelier is credited.

A closer analysis of the manuscript’s illustrations reveals that two of the twenty-seven paintings (folios 28a and 40a, figs. 1 and 2) were painted in a style different from that of the rest of the illustrations and thus
Fig. 1. *The Young Hawk Steals the Bird from the King’s Hawk*, fol. 28a, *Anvār-i Suhayl*, copied in 1570. School of Oriental and African Studies, ms. no. 10102. (Reproduced with the permission of the SOAS Library)