KAMAL AL-DIN BIHZAD AND AUTHORSHIP IN PERSIANATE PAINTING

Bihzad was one of the painters. He painted extremely delicately, but he made the faces of beardless people badly by drawing the double chin too big. He drew the faces of bearded people quite well.

Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur, Baburnama, ca. 1529

It is difficult to find an artist more perplexing than Kamal al-Din Bihzad (d. 1535–36). In the history of Persianate painting he bests all other painters before and after in the quantity of recollections about him and his work. Contemporary and later writers are unanimous in their praise of Bihzad, the Mughal ruler Babur’s slight and curiously specific criticism being by far the exception rather than the rule. Bihzad became, in Armenag Sakisian’s words, “a rhetorical figure of comparison” and even supplanted Mani, false prophet and painter of mythical skill in the Persian cultural tradition, as a paragon of excellence. Because Bihzad has garnered copious encomia, his contribution to the Persianate art tradition recognized again and again, the artist’s life and work seem tantalizingly within reach, unlike so many artists who were only given passing notice.

Scholarly thinking and writing on Bihzad have embraced the wealth of references to him that are recorded in the primary literature. Driven by the promise of Bihzad’s extraordinary achievement conveyed in these sources, scholars have sought to reconstruct the artist’s biography and extant oeuvre using a small group of “signed” manuscript paintings. We even have a portrait of the artist Bihzad, mounted in an album assembled for Shah Tahmasp (r. 1524–76), an image that points yet again to the artist as a person. Key among the group of core manuscripts assigned to Bihzad is the Bāstān of Sa’di, copied by Sultan ’Ali al-Katib (al-Mashhadi) and dated 1488. It contains four paintings “signed” by Bihzad, including the seduction of Yusuf (fig. 1). After identifying a corpus of documented work, stylistic, technical, and subject-related features thought typical of, and peculiar to, Bihzad were then picked out and described. Having isolated them, these features attained the status of diagnostics. Visual extrapolation opened up a process in which unsigned works were identified as being made in the early, middle, or late stages of the artist’s life (underwritten by the teleological concept of the artist’s evolution, of his inexorable stylistic trajectory), in relationship to fixed points in his dated corpus. Then attributed works were judged for their authenticity, fleshing out the oeuvre still further. The method is a long established one in the discipline of the history of art, and it was used yet again in Ebadollah Bahari’s recent monograph on Bihzad. But, as we shall see, this method of stylistic analysis, more specifically its operative conditions, is actually ill-suited to certain aspects of the practice of painting in the Persianate milieu of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century.

Since the early 1900’s scholars have championed Bihzad, and although their motivations are rarely stated, a desire to promote an individual artist in an art tradition believed to comprise so many anonymous makers does come to the fore. Here, at long last emerged an artist who could rival the European art tradition’s list of heroes: F. R. Martin, writing in 1909 and 1912, raved about Bihzad, asking rhetorically whether or not his portraits matched those of Memling, Holbein, and Raphael; Ali Ahmad Naimi, writing as late as 1948, compared Bihzad to Jean Fouquet and François Clouet. Comparisons between Bihzad and European artists were positively de rigueur.

One unspoken reason behind the adulation may have been to enhance the saleability of a “nameable” artist on the early-twentieth-century art market. But without inspecting such fundamental aspects of the field’s social and economic culture, the construction and refinement of Bihzad’s role qua painter in the Persianate tradition has continued unchallenged, despite more recent attempts to adjust our vision of him. Thomas Lentz proposed a curative of sorts in