AN ARTIST'S IMPRESSION:
MU'IN MUSAVVIR'S TIGER ATTACKING A YOUTH

Few seventeenth-century Safavid drawings have created as much interest and discussion as Mu'in Musavvir's so-called Lion Attacking a Youth, dated 1082 (1672) (fig. 1). Executed during the last quarter of Mu'in's long artistic career (ca. 1635–ca. 1697), the single-page composition stands out for its unusual subject matter—a helpless youth being devoured by a wild beast—and its long, detailed inscription. Although Mu'in's tendency to inscribe his oeuvre is evident in many other examples, the annotation on the Boston drawing not only includes a precise explanation of its iconography, but also the artist's remarks on additional events that profoundly affected him at the time. The content of Mu'in's inscription is all the more significant when compared to other contemporary Persian accounts of the period, which consist primarily of official historical chronicles. With the king and his ruling elite as their subject, these histories provide little information on the everyday existence of ordinary people. Quite apart from its artistic value, therefore, Mu'in's drawing serves as an important document, offering a rare personal glimpse of life in Isfahan during the reign of Shah Sulayman (1666–92).

The drawing (13.7 cm. × 20 cm.) shows a group of men trying to restrain a massive feline creature from man-

Fig. 1. Tiger Attacking a Youth. Mu'in Musavvir, dated 1082 (1672). Francis Bartlett Donation, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 14.634. (photo: courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)
A look at the secondary literature on the so-called Lion Attacking a Youth reveals both the importance attached to Muʿin’s inscription and the various interpretations it has engendered. For instance, a number of scholars have argued that the composition was done in Bukhara; others have suggested that it was executed at a stove-maker’s shop (bukhārī-sāz), presumably in Isfahan, the city with which Muʿīn has been associated. The exact date of the drawing has also been debated and certain parts of the inscription have defied deciphering altogether.

Disagreement on the correct reading of some of the words and passages in the inscription clearly stems in part from Muʿīn’s hurried, nearly illegible writing, particularly towards the end of the text, where lack of space forced him to compress his words and lines. The reading is further complicated by the fact that the annotation is written in naskh with a tendency towards the shikasta script. This is visible in the formation of certain letters such as the final ی in īlchī (line 2), the final ن in yik man (lines 15, 16), or the combination of letters as shown by the ligature of the letters alif and lām in bagāl (line 9). Muʿīn also does not distinguish between the letters b and p at in pānsa (line 6) and che and jīm as in īlchī (line 2) or chahār (line 16), but such orthographic irregularities were not unusual for the period.

Translation.

[1] It was Monday, the day of the Feast of the blessed Ramadān, [2, 3, 4] of the year 1082, when the ambassador of Bukhara had brought a tiger with a rhinoceros as gifts for His most exalted Majesty, Shah Sulayman. [5, 6, 7, 8, 9] At the Darvaza-Dawlat, the above-mentioned tiger jumped up suddenly and tore off half the face of a grocer’s assistant, fifteen or sixteen years of age. And he died within the hour. We heard about the grocer but did not see him. [This] was drawn in memory of it. [10] And in that year, from the beginning of the second half of the honorable month of Shaʿban [11] until the 8th day of Shawwal until now, there have been eighteen [12, 13] heavy snowfalls of such magnitude that the trouble of shoveling snow had exasperated people. [14] And the price of most goods [15] went up, and firewood, one man [16] at four bāstī, and kindling, one man [17] at six bāstī, were still unobtainable. [18] And the cold was such that there were no glass bottles [19] or rosewater bottles, etc., left. May God [20] end it well. [It is] Monday, the 8th [21] of the month of Shawwal, the year 1082; heavy snow is falling; [22] we stayed at home because of the cold. [23] It was drawn, the work of Muʿīn Musavvir.

Since the publication of the drawing, the feline beast in Muʿīn’s composition has been generally identified as a lion. In lines 2 and 6 of the inscription, however, a stroke can be seen below the word referring to the animal. As this must stand for two joined dots, it confirms that the first two letters of the word are the letter bāb (tiger) and