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MINIATURE. 'A MOUNTED PRINCE HUNTING WITH A FALCON'

INDIA, DECCAN, AURANGABAD?; C. 1700

THE LEAF: 29.9 X 19.8 CM

In 1687–88, the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb conquered the last two Deccan sultanates, Golconda and Bijapur, and set up his new city of Aurangabad as the centre of power in the region. Many painters from the defeated sultanates now flocked there and came to work side by side with colleagues trained at the Mughal court in Delhi. The result was a new style that combined the exoticism and intense colours of Deccan painting with the sober naturalism of the Mughals.

This sumptuous painting exemplifies the fusion of the two traditions. The depiction of a princely rider surrounded by servants is clearly inspired by the formal portraits of rulers found in Mughal art, but the rich and contrasting palette seen in the lavish textiles reveals the influence of the Deccan tradition. The ceremonial sombreness that often infuses Mughal paintings is further disrupted here by the orange-clad page's surprising eye contact with the viewer.

Furthermore, there is an exotic quality to the landscape through which the procession steadily glides. The foreground is dotted with brightly coloured flowers, while the strange rock formations in the middle ground contain several ‘hidden’ images of animals, including a lion and an ox spewing water to the far right. In the distant background behind a diminutive city marches an army with fluttering flags, standards, trumpets and timpani, a vision almost reminiscent of a mirage. The army, flanked by two angels, is undoubtedly the prince’s main force, which he has temporarily left with his hunting party.

Recent research suggests that the rider represents Muhammad Bidar Bakht (1670–1707), who was the Mughal governor in Aurangabad around 1700. Furthermore, the artist behind the portrait has been identified as Afzan Ali Khan, a Mughal painter affiliated with the court in Aurangabad, who painted several portraits of Muhammad Bidar Bakht up through the 1680s.[1]

Muhammad Bidar Bakht was the son of Prince Azam Shah (4/1980), who in turn was son of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb and heir to the throne. Bidar Bakht and his father were both killed during the succession dispute following Aurangzeb’s death in 1707, and power then passed to Azam Shah’s half-brother Bahadur Shah (12/2015).

1 *John Seyller and Jagdish Mittal: Deccani Paintings, Drawings and Manuscripts in the Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art, Hydarabad 2018, cat. 40, pp. 161–165.*

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