

# Basawan: The Peerless Colourist of Mughal Miniature Art

Afshan Anjum

Department of Fine Arts, Aligarh Muslim University  
E-mail: afshananjum389@gmail.com

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**Abstract**—Basawan was a famous and fecund artist of the Mughal School whose depiction of features, rendering of colours, portrait paintings and background paintings were marvellous. He was expert in creating manifold characters and exploration of their physiognomies, textures of the cloth and the style of their adjustment in space. He was a foremost artist who learnt European techniques like realistic portraits, atmospheric perspective, and a painterly approach to landscape.

Basawan became famous by his sensitive portraits which were imitated by generations of artists. In his early days he rarely worked as a colourist and his approach towards art was rational.

In this paper i am going to describe the workstyle of Basawan who worked as a colourist, through his famous paintings. The data is based on secondary sources.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Basawan was a famous and fecund artist of Mughal School whose depiction of features, rendering of colours, portrait paintings and background paintings were marvellous. He joined the Mughal court at Delhi at a very young age and his career flourished during (1580-1600). Some art critics considered him a better painter than Dasawant but Abul Fazal placed him at the fourth place after Daswant in his Ain-i-Akbari. The styles of both the artists differ which were appreciated by their contemporaries and after the death of Daswant, Akbar's interest increased in historical and documentary subjects, Basawan became the conspicuous artist of the Mughal court.

## 2. WORKSTYLE OF BASAWAN

Basawan was expert in creating manifold characters and exploration of their physiognomies, textures of the cloth and the style of their adjustment in space. Most of the Mughal manuscripts were illuminated by him during his lifetime and he has contributed to a number of major painting projects done during the period of Akbar. When he was young, he worked under the guidance of Persian artists Mir Sayyid Ali and Khwaja Abdus Samad in Akbar's Kitab Khana. Though he spent his initial years under the supervision of Mir Sayyid Ali but his fascinations were different from Mir Sayyid Ali's as

we can get through the drawing of "Seated Man" (Plate 1). In "Seated Youth" (Plate 2) by Mir Sayyid Ali, the artist has used the figure as a source of aesthetic beauty and the lines for expression, however Basawan has used the lines as tools for the representation of jolly Falstaffian personality. The portrayal of Seated Man was the outcome of the awareness day to day world experience.



Plate 1: Seated Man by Basawan

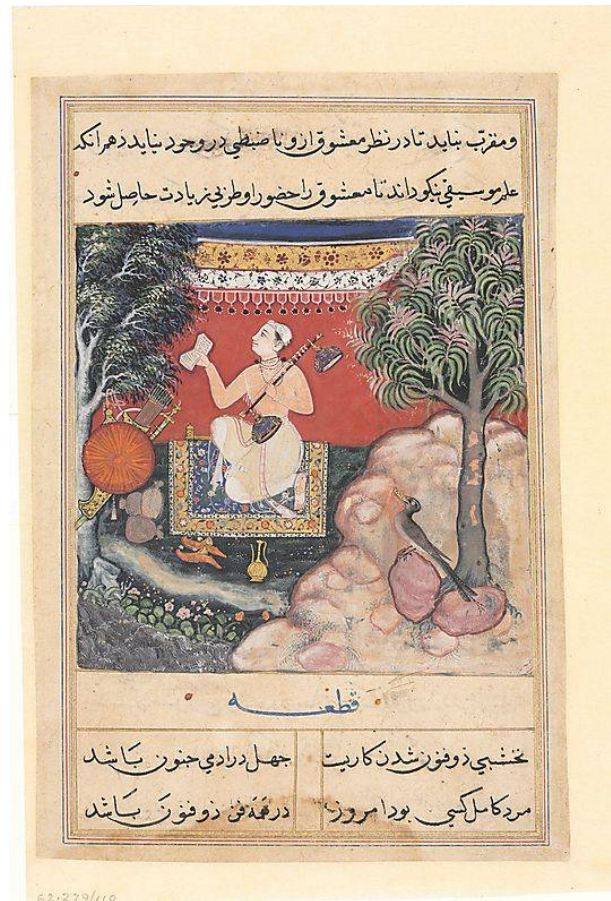


**Plate 2: Seated Youth by Mir Sayyid Ali**

He was a foremost Indian artist who learnt new European techniques like realistic portraits, atmospheric perspective, strong contrasts of light and shade, and a painterly approach to landscape after being inspired by the engravings of German and Flemish artists, like Albrecht Durer of German Renaissance, who was famous for his theoretical treatises, which involve principles of maths, perspective and ideal proportions. These engravings were brought to Akbar by Jesuit missionaries in 1580's. Basawan came out to be the master of imperial Mughal realism and most innovative painter of Akbar's court with his eclectic style which was logical and controlled, having the touch of highly ornate and often extravagant qualities of Baroque art.

About hundreds of paintings were executed by him which mostly comprise illustrations for manuscripts and Baswan has worked as a designer in most of them with another artist Chatar Muni, who applied the colours. The illumination of manuscripts done by him include Razmnama, Darab-Nama by Abu Taher Muhammad ("Book of Darius" in Persian containing prose romance and adventures of Kayanid Iranian Kind Darab, preserved in the British Museum), Akbarnama, Baharestan (means "Spring garden," Book in Persian containing prose about Sufism and mysticism, preserved in the Bodleian Library, Oxford) and Timur-Nama. At the beginning of 1560's Basawan was assigned the illustrations of

Tutinama (c.1556-61). A painting "Origin of Music" (Plate 3) from Tutinama shows his mastery over portraiture, depiction of rocks and trees with naturalism which was something new in Indian art. These illustrations also reveal his style of rendering stable, mellifluous compositions and his inclination towards creating spectacular effects. He was also an important artist in production of Hamzanama illustrations as a painter of portraits, rocks, trees and also a master of composition. In a painting, night attack on the camp of Malik Iraj (Plate 4) Basawan's style is visible in the depiction of rocks and massive trees. This Hamzanama illustration resembles the Akbarnama painting "Akbar witnessing the armed combat of Hindu ascetics" which was done by Basawan after 20 years.



**Plate 3: Origin of Music by Basawan**





**Plate 4: Night Attack on the Camp of Malik Iraj by Basawan**

Basawan became famous by his sensitive portraits especially in Akbarnama (The official biography of Akbar) which were imitated by generations of artists. Akbar brought artists from multicultures, the Persians, the Europeans, the Hindus and the Muslims, from which Basawan's art developed. He emphasised the painterly style rather than the linear and his paintings were elegant, done in extremely thorough and careful way, with a great sense of proportion and harmony nourished with Safavid roots. In his early days he rarely worked as a colourist and his approach towards art was rational. He was immensely inspired by the European prints and the influence of which we can see through his ability to create recession and to form designs in depth.

Though the painters of Akbar's court did not completely incorporate the techniques of drawing perspective. They have just merged the linear perspective with the aerial perspective to maintain continuity in the compositions. One of the reasons behind this was that, the Mughal style did not follow a particular arc of stylistic evolution. Instead it went through different styles of adoption, rejection, and revival of Persian and European techniques. Other reason might be that the Mughals were not interested in creating the illusion of space, they gave more importance to fine details, intense colours, and elegant use of line and composition for instance. The monochromatic paintings done by Basawan in black, umber and burnt sienna which were referred to as *nim-qalam* or *syah qalam* were also influenced by the *grisaille* effect of European engravings.

Basawan enjoyed depicting the animals in his various paintings. In the two paintings "The donkey dressed as a tiger" and "A hunter captures a female parrot" of Tutinama, we can see his marvellous portrayal of animals and vegetation. His interest in animal themes rose during the reign of Akbar and was fully expressed through the illustrations of natural life in Babar-nama (the memoir of Babar).

As he belonged to the caste of shepherds and farmers, we can see his empathy for the folks in his portrait of a flute player who is clad in a flowing shawl and dancing while playing with his instrument.

During the final years of Akbar's reign the Mughal paintings get dominated by religious and Hindu asceticism. The reason behind this was that he started a new religion 'Deen-e-ilahi' the aim of which was 'to compromise' or 'Suleh Kul', through which Akbar tied to win the support of Hindu subjects. He got the main works of classic Sanskrit literature subjects translated into Persian and Basawan became the master painter of these subjects as he was skilled in conveying the psychological states. He painted sadhus, yogis, and other religious personages with complete authenticity and in an idealised and pleasing way.

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