

COURT PAINTING FROM INDIA





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ASIA
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COVERS: DETAIL NO. 9
INSIDE FRONT: DETAIL NO. 43
INSIDE BACK COVER: DETAIL NO. 4

1. FOLIO FROM THE FIRST OR 'SOUTH KENSINGTON' BABURNAMA
BABUR HUNTING RHINOCEROS NEAR SWATI
 ASCRIBED TO THE ARTISTS L'AL AND SARWAN
 MUGHAL INDIA, CIRCA 1589

Opaque pigments with gold on paper, eight and a half lines of *nasta'liq* on recto, fourteen on the verso; artists' names inscribed in red on lower margin, gold border ruled in blue and green 9½ by 5½ in.; 24 by 13.7 cm. painting
 10½ by 6½ in.; 26.3 by 17.3 cm. folio

THE MANUSCRIPT

The *Baburnama* is one of the most all-encompassing and engaging pre-modern autobiographies. Babur, founder of the Mughal Empire (r.1526-30), records all the adventures and turmoil in the life of an itinerant prince. He also writes about his reaction on arriving in India, with details of the people, flora and fauna, which are some of the most revealing parts of the text.

It was not until the reign of Emperor Akbar (r.1556-1605) that the *Baburnama* was translated into Persian from Turki, the ancestral language of the Mughals, by Mirza 'Abd al-Rahim Khan-i Khanan. Court artists produced the first illustrated copy soon after the Persian translation was completed in 1589. Our folio belongs to this copy that was broken up in 1913 and dispersed. It is sometimes referred to as the 'South Kensington' *Baburnama* as twenty folios are in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (Stronge, pp.86-91 and Smart, 1977). Three other royal copies survive: one dating to the early 1590s, now in the British Library, with 143 illustrations and 40 or so missing (Suleiman; Losty & Roy, pp.39-45). A further copy is divided between the Moscow State Museum of Eastern Cultures and the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. The only one in a near-complete state is now in the National Museum in New Delhi (Randhawa, 1983) and all four manuscripts were studied by Ellen Smart in 1977 (Smart, 1977).

SUBJECT

This scene shows Babur hunting rhinoceros near Swati. Babur tells us that he went hunting in Kargkhana (rhino home), where the forest was dense, and it was challenging to drive the animals out, so some of the forest was set alight. Babur describes a calf being killed as it lay scorched by the fire, and everyone taking a share of the spoils. This is the moment illustrated here where the scorched animal is being pulled apart by the hunting party which Babur observes on horseback to the left. Babur was evidently interested in the rhinoceros, as it appears again later in the memoir: an episode with his son Humayan and a hunt near Bigram (Peshawar) in December 1526. A rhino was pursued across a plain, and Babur notes that Humayan and others were very entertained, as they had never seen one before. Both these episodes were popular subjects for illustration. There are two other paintings of Babur hunting rhinoceros at Swati, from additional copies of the *Baburnama*, that share a similar composition to one another but differ from this earlier version: one in the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (W.596.21B) and another in the British Library, London (f.305b), both full-page paintings with text.

BABUR'S DESCRIPTION OF THE EVENT DEPICTED

The text describing the episode (Thackston, pp. 269-270):

Babur writes:

'I myself went towards Swati, which is also called Kargkhana, to hunt rhinoceros. Several were found, but they did not come out of the thick forest. One with a calf ventured into the open and began to run away. Many arrows were shot at it, but it





managed to get itself back into the thicket. Even when fire was set to the forest it could not be caught. A calf was burned, however, and lay there writhing. It was slaughtered and everybody took a trophy share.'

THE ARTISTS

This painting is emblematic of the refined Mughal style that developed in Akbar's studio in the late 1580s and 90s. The use of shading and the distant glimpse of a city point to the assimilation of elements from European prints, whereas the overall composition, page layout and iconography are rooted in the Sultanate, Persian and Indic traditions that were successfully amalgamated early in Akbar's reign. As the first of the four primary court copies of the *Baburnama*, the illustrations have lively and fresh compositions with a lighter, more softly painted style.

La'l was one of the premier artists in Akbar's atelier and was responsible for this folio's overall design or composition ('*tarh*'). He also designed no fewer than nineteen paintings in another major manuscript from Akbar's studio, the earliest copy of the *Akbarnama* in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, painted at a similar time, circa 1590-5 (Stronge, p.45).

Sarwan painted and completed the execution of La'l's composition for our folio. He also worked on the earliest copy of the *Akbarnama*. In all five paintings in this volume, he collaborated with the great artist Miskin, such as the right side of a splendid double-page image of a hunt (Stronge, p.63). Sarwan likely completed his contributions to the *Akbarnama* just after the *Baburnama* in the early 1590s. Little is known about these artists. However, as an apprentice working exclusively

with such prestigious artists as Miskin and La'l, Sarwan was most likely regarded as a junior master who had already reached a high level of competence.

INSCRIPTIONS

In the lower margin:

tarh-i la'l 'amal-i sarwan "Designed by La'l, painted by Sarwan"

PROVENANCE

Manuscript dispersed 1913

Probably Luzac & Co., London

H. Kahn Monif (1888-1964), New York

Private collection, London, circa 1950s-60s

Thence by descent to a private collection, London until 2022

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