



Figurative Art in Medieval Islam: And the Riddle of Bihzad of Herat (1465-1535)

By Michael Barry

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In terms of elucidating inner meaning and symbolism, the study of medieval Islamic art has lagged almost a full century behind that of medieval Western art. This groundbreaking work suggests how it might at last prove possible to crack the allegorical code of medieval Islamic painting during its Golden Age between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Barry focuses his study around the work of Bihzād, a painter who flourished in the late fifteenth century in the kingdom of Herat, now in Afghanistan. Bihzād became the undisputed master of the “Persian miniature” and an almost mythical personality throughout Asian Islam. By carefully deciphering the visual symbols in medieval Islamic figurative art, Barry’s study deliberately takes a bold approach in order to decode the lost iconographic conventions of a civilization. The glorious illustrations, scholarly text, and extracts from Persian poetry, many translated into English for the first time, combine to create an essential new work of reference and a visual delight.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The illuminated manuscripts of Kamaluddin Bihzad, a court painter to the early Safavid Dynasty, are revelations of color and form. His figures, rendered with fluid lines, are marvelously expressive, his backgrounds crowded with undulating trees or stunning architectural patterns. The eye is unsure where to alight, until it comes upon a central figure—a turbaned Joseph kneeling on a delicately patterned rug, or a horseman flinching as his mount transfigures into a seven-headed demon. Western scholars of Islamic art have been aware of Bihzad's gifts for some time, but most have dismissively categorized his work as illustrative. However, Barry contends Bihzad's paintings are of an intensely religious quality, despite the Islamic injunction against images. Barry's arguments are convincing, his erudition is impressive, and his book is stuffed with delightful reproductions. But his prose can be repetitive, and his organizational choices can confuse the reader. Why, for example, does Barry discuss the history of "Orientalist" scholarship and Bihzad's influence on Matisse before reporting Bihzad was born around "1465, died in 1535, and was a native of the Central Asian kingdom of Herat, an oasis in what is now northwestern Afghanistan"? In all, the book is a detailed introduction to an unsung genius, but it may be too detailed and circuitous for the casual reader.

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From the Inside Flap

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About the Author

Michael Barry, born in New York City in 1948, raised in France, now lectures at Princeton University, his alma mater, on the traditional and modern cultures of Iran and especially Afghanistan. Barry is widely published and holds six literary prizes.

Stuart Cary Welch, former curator of Islamic and Later Indian Art at Harvard University's Fogg and Sackler Museums, is widely recognized as one of the world's foremost specialists of Persian and Mughal painting.

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