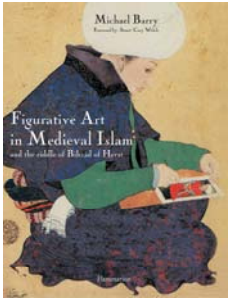


Figurative Art in Medieval Islam and the Riddle of Bihzâd of Herât (1465-1535) / Michael Barry.--Paris, France: Éditions Flammarion, dist. by Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., September 2005.--400 p.: ill.--ISBN 2-0803-0421-6: \$95.00.



Michael Barry has written both an art history and a scholarly mystery book. An elegant, multi-layered narrative, interwoven with beautiful, full and half-page color reproductions, make this publication a rare, readers' treat.

The author was born in New York City but lived in France for much of his life. He studied Islamic art at Harvard and now lectures at Princeton University on the cultures of Iran, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. He has watched first-hand the making of much of Afghanistan's history, traveling there regularly between the years 1978 and 2001. Barry's other published works include a French-language study of Nizâmî's poetry.

The central question of this book is: Why did a tradition of figural painting develop and thrive in the middle of a supposedly icon-phobic civilization, stretching all the way from Istanbul to Delhi? How could a figurative painter like Bihzâd come to be venerated throughout the Muslim world?

Barry uses his first chapter to unravel the efforts of art historians to understand Islamic figurative art. This "scholar's history" is itself an adventure and Barry does a marvelous job of bringing the book's readers into the process of discovery. He also cleverly incorporates into the text information that is usually relegated to footnotes, making the history accessible to both the novice and the academic reader. Barry believes the standard theory, that figurative painting in Islamic art is an aberration riding on the whim of strong-willed rulers, is in conflict with available facts. Patrons of figural painting included the most zealous Muslim rulers of the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, such as the Ottoman Sultan and Mehmed the Conqueror. Additionally, the subject matter of these figural paintings is not secular; many are used to illustrate sacred texts.

In chapter two, Barry reconstructs the rising and falling dynasties of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. He introduces the warriors/rulers who built and ruled these dynasties and the men who painted for them. This is a key chapter, as it is here that Barry establishes the stylistic and iconographic sources that are central material for his new approach to studying "Persian miniatures." Barry borrows Emile Mâle's methodology, developed over a century ago to decipher the meaning in medieval Christian art, and uses it to re-examine Islamic figurative painting. Barry shows readers Sasanian Persian precedents and introduces mystics like Nizâmî and Rûmî, whose writings will provide a major tool for Barry's rediscovery of the meanings of these paintings.

Chapters three and four are devoted to the paintings, patrons, and literature sources of the figurative painter Bihzâd. In these chapters Barry presents the keystones he believes help solve the paradox of figurative painting in Islamic art. In chapter five, the concluding chapter, Barry polishes his arguments by closely examining a number of paintings by Bihzâd that were used to illustrate the romances of Nizâmî.

What helps to hold this extremely complicated and information-laden book together, is a clearly delineated structure of time and space, reintroduced as each of the players or locations changes. Barry also helps his readers orient themselves by using multiple references to western Christian art, either by citing a western artist's or ruler's contemporary or by comparing someone in the Islamic world with a similar western Christian figure.

The book has an index. It also has as a bibliography, which is subdivided thematically. It contains an extensive chronology and two color maps of the Islamic world.

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