

SAINT MAGDALENE—OR BIBI RABI'A BASRI IN MOGUL PAINTING?

A SUBJECT which is to be found fairly frequently in Mogul paintings, especially of the later period, is the representation of a girl—or woman—kneeling on the ground with a halo round her head. Before her stands a candelabrum (*Zaurang*). On the ground lie some books. She herself seems to be roused from meditation by the approach of one or several angels coming from the side and offering her food and drink.

There has been up to now some obscurity as to the exact meaning of these pictures. In some galleries they are placed amongst the "Europeanizing" pictures as representing some less known Christian subject.

One such painting was exhibited at the Coronation Durbar at Delhi in 1911¹ and was there entitled "The Virgin Mary with ministering Angels." But anybody knowing Christian paintings will hesitate to accept this interpretation, for never in the West has the Virgin Mary been represented in such a way.

Far more plausible appears at first sight the interpretation given by A. K. Coomaraswamy. In the first volume of his "Indian Drawings"² he shows another version of the same subject which he styles "Magdalene with ministering angels."

What we know historically about Mary Magdalene is that she was one of the most ardent followers of Jesus Christ. Together with Mary the mother of Jesus she stood near the cross and on Easter morning she was the first to arrive at the empty tomb, the first to see Jesus after His resurrection and to carry the great news to the Apostles.³

In all probability she is to be identified with that Mary of Magdala who a few days before the death of Jesus had poured the perfume over His feet.⁴ She had led a publicly sinful life until meeting with His purity and sanctity she was converted. That is what we know from history.

1. Cf. "Loan Exhibition of Antiquities, Coronation Durbar 1911." Pl. LXIX

2. Ibid. Pl. XVII.

3. Cf. Gospel of St. John, XIX, 25; XX, 1, 11 ff.

4. Cf. Gospel of St. Luke, VII, 36 ff; VIII, 2.



Legend, however, or tradition continued the story of her life. After the ascension of Jesus Christ she is said to have lived a life of penance for her former sins. And in the south of France the legend arose that one of the islands near Marseilles was the scene of this lonely life. Separated as she was from all men, it was through the hands of angels that she received food and drink.

The historical fact of her conversion from a sinner's to a saint's life is the reason why in the Catholic Church she was always regarded as a patroness of reformed fallen women.

But in the 17th century the legend of that beautiful penitent in the desert captured the imagination of artists, and in this period many paintings represented "Magdalene in the desert." According to the sensuality that characterizes profane Renaissance painting and which managed to creep even into Christian art, she was often represented in such a way that the beauty of her body was but slightly veiled by the flowing tresses of her hair.

Now it is a fact that the Mogul paintings under discussion undoubtedly show a strong resemblance to the paintings of "Magdalene in the desert," such as those by Titian or by Ribera.

The conclusion, therefore, that we are here shown not the Virgin Mary but Magdalene, seems fairly convincing.

Fairly, I say. For there remains a doubt. Is it not surprising that just this "Magdalene" shows in so many examples hardly any or no traces of any European model? And, generally speaking, how is it to be explained that out of the vast number of Catholic saints just this saint—St. Magdalene—should have been represented so frequently? After all, would not other saints have offered greater interest than she? Besides, a closer study of our paintings shows that the Virgin represented cannot be a Christian, as in some of the pictures her costume is clearly Muhammadan. In a painting, for instance, at the Bharata Itihasa Samshodaka Mandala at Poona, under the transparent *sari* of the kneeling Virgin are clearly visible a pair of long Muhammadan trousers.

The angels, too, are represented in a very different style from angels in other paintings. Every student of Mogul paintings knows that winged angels are to be found not only in Christian but also in Muhammadan pictures. Personally, however, I am inclined to believe that we may go a step further and ascribe all angels executed in *this* particular style to a Muhammadan brush. This, however, is a point which needs further investigation.¹ It may be sufficient here to point out the striking resemblance between these pictures and another set of pictures which are equally frequent showing "Ibrahim Adham." Ibrahim himself is usually represented in a position different from that of the Virgin. He sits on the ground, his closed eyes indicating that he is in deep meditation. But the angels, their dresses, the style of their wings, the gesture with which they offer food and drink—all that is exactly the same as in our

1. On which I hope to give some further indications in a later publication.

pictures—(Plate I). As Ibrahim Adham is a well-known Sufi saint who lived in the 8th century, this seems to indicate that to identify the corresponding female saint we shall have to search the surroundings of this Ibrahim Adham.

The writer of these lines was therefore interested to find at Hyderabad (Deccan) two pictures representing the subject under discussion. One is in the private collection of Sir Akbar Hydari, the other in that of Nawab Salar Jung.¹ They both bear inscriptions which, as I am inclined to believe, definitely solve the problem :

“ BIBI RABI‘A BAŞRI .”

In both cases, especially in that of the picture belonging to Sir Akbar Hydari, there can be no reasonable doubt as to the genuineness of the inscription. The golden colour in which it is executed is the same as that employed in other portions of the picture, for instance in the halo of the saint.

Who is “ Bibi Rabi‘a Başri ” ? To the readers of this review she is too well-known to need any further introduction. Her real name was Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiya Basri being a surname taken from the town where she was born and where she spent the greater part of her life—Başra in Mesopotamia.

As a child she had been stolen from her family and sold as a slave. But she managed to recover freedom and renouncing marriage gave herself to a solitary life, partly in the desert, partly at Başra itself.

While Ibrahim represents rather the ascetic line of Sufism, Rabi‘a is one of the best known Sufi mystics. Many of her sayings have come down to us testifying to the greatness and purity of the love of God she attained. She died at the age of about 90 years in 801 A.D.

The similarity of style between the two sets of paintings seems to show that Rabi‘a and Ibrahim were closely connected in the minds of Indian Muhammadans of the 17th and the following centuries. At any rate this resemblance excludes whatever doubt there might remain as to the genuineness of the inscriptions : Our paintings really represent no other than Rabi‘a al-‘Adawiya. This being established, there still remains one question. How is it to be explained that Rabi‘a Başri is represented so frequently in the later Mogul period, whilst—as far as I can see she was never represented before ?—Why do her pictures often represent such a striking resemblance to contemporary Western representations of St. Mary Magdalene ?—In particular, how is it to be explained that in some paintings, as for instance in that in the possession of Nawab Salar Jung, the Virgin is represented half nude—which, as everybody knows, is extremely rare in Mogul painting ?

Is there not after all some truth in Coomaraswamy’s interpretation ? Is it not probable that there *does* exist some connection with the “ St. Magdalene in the Wilderness ” of the West ?

1. See Plate II & III.





It is a general fact which is easy to prove—though up to now it has not found sufficient acknowledgment—that in the great majority of cases the Mogul painters did not merely copy European models, but inspired by some western picture, re-conceived the subject and reproduced it in their own way. It therefore seems not unreasonable to believe that Bibi Rabi'a originally *was* St. Magdalene. That is to say, seeing some picture of "Magdalene in the Wilderness" the Muhammadan painter adopted the general conception of the Christian picture and represented in the same attitude and style a saint of his own creed, whose life after all, according to legend, was not without some resemblance to that of St. Magdalene. This painting becoming popular amongst Muhammadans was reproduced again and again, severing in the course of the process more and more its connexion with the original painting from the West.

This is, of course, not more than a hypothesis, yet it seems to offer the best explanation of the facts.

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