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Anne-Maria van Egmond

### CONTENTS AND ABSTRACTS

Jan van Campen.

'The Nuancing of the Eternal': Herman Visser and the Arts from Asia, 1918-1928.

The work of Herman Visser (1890-1965) and Taco Roorda (1874-1938) during the first ten years of the Vereeniging van Vrienden der Aziatische Kunst (VVAK, now the Royal Asian Art Society in the Netherlands, 1918-present) was instrumental to establishing a field of expertise in the Netherlands, to introduce the notion that important works of art were created in Asia. The selection of objects was primarily based on their own sense of aesthetic experience. It was a sense that arose from interacting with contemporary European art, above all focussed on the cosmic order, the spiritual foundations of reality – or rather, the nuancing of the eternal. During this process, objects were entirely isolated from their context and viewed more as contemporary works of autonomous art than as important products of an Asian culture. Yet the knowledge of Asian art grew and art history evolved in the direction of connoisseurship, an evolution in which Visser, contrary to Roorda, participated from the start. Visser's involvement marked the onset of a methodological approach to Asian art history in the Netherlands.

Jos Gommans

Reflections on a Miniature Painting with 'Deccan Ruler'

The present short notice examines a rare miniature painting in the Rijksmuseum, likely produced in the Deccan region of India circa 1650-1700. Depicted in the painting are a seated ruler and his servants, a child, and a mirror or portrait. The scene is surmounted by a mirrored Quranic verse (Surah 5:112-114). Through material-technical, iconographic and historical analysis, the central figure can possibly be identified as Muhammad Adil Shah, sultan of Bijapur in South India (r. 1627-56), with his son Ali. The presence of a Dutch-language inscription and paper of Western manufacture point to European involvement, probably via the Dutch East India Company (VOC). An alternative, though far more improbable interpretation identifies the ruler as the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, with his son, Dara Shukoh. The image contains esoteric elements, like mirror writing, as well as mystical references to the sacred, inner meaning of princely authority. The combination of text and image suggests a deliberate symbolic layer, though its precise meaning is left intentionally obscured, in keeping with the occult function of these paintings produced in the court circles of the Mughal and Deccan empires.

Roselyne Hurel

A Series of Deccani Miniatures: Imaginary Creatures Invented for a Princely 'Keepsake'

The Mythical Bird, preserved in the Rijksmuseum, belongs to a series of Deccani miniatures show-

ing varied and hybrid creatures dispersed by Maggs Bros between 1966 and 1972. All the miniatures share the same composition, in the foreground featuring a strange creature standing in a grassy landscape that extends into a faraway vista filled with a variety of comparatively diminutive buildings, tiny people and animals. On the verso of the miniatures that could be consulted, we find an inscription in Persian script describing a creature very different from what is depicted on the recto, enabling us to reconstruct the original sequence of the set. Some of the miniatures remind us of illustrations in the manuscripts forming part of Qazwini's encyclopaedia, the *Aja'ib al makhluqat*, one of the most famous works from the Islamic medieval period. Translated into Persian, Greek and Turkish, this book remained popular for centuries. Qazwini includes stories about Iskandar (Alexander the Great) but also tales of imaginary creatures and monsters. The Abbasid period is an era marked by great maritime discoveries, when navigators and adventurous traders wrote their memoirs describing unexplored lands and strange creatures that became legendary. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, courtiers in the sultanates of the Deccan patronized art and were traditionally very interested in literature, magic, cosmology, astronomy and strange and wondrous creatures. Members of the Asaf Jahi dynasty in the city of Aurangabad, for instance, were great enthusiasts. On the basis of large painted canvases produced in an Aurangabad workshop, depicting the theme of Barahmasa (the twelve months), Sultan Salabat Jang is suggested as the possible patron of the present set of miniatures.

Pieter Breuker, Jeroen ter Brugge, Ghizlan El Hachimi, Maria Holtrop, Jan de Hond, Jan Pelsdonk, Eveline Sint Nicolaas and Harm Stevens  
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Reference:

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