

A Painted Enamel from Lucknow in the Jñāna-Pravāha Collection

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Till recently, I was inclined to suggest an Iranian provenance to this remarkably attractive dome-shaped finial overlaid with polychrome enamelling (Figs.1,2,3 & 4), attached originally to a gem-encrusted ear ornament. It was sheer coincidence that while studying the history of the fabled pink-enamelling of Banaras I examined at length the enamelled ornamentation of this piece and ended up discovering certain crucial stylistic elements to revise my earlier hastily deduced attribution. At first glance, the sensual appeal of the figures and the naturalistic treatment of the organic pattern of flora and fauna would lead one to accept a linkage with the polychrome enamels produced for the elitist circle of Qajar rulers. Parallel to these stylistic features, there are numerous subtle details relatable to a particular genre of painting fed on Iranian pictorial imagery, much in vogue at Faizabad-Lucknow during the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

The piece of jewellery¹ under consideration belongs to the rarefied group of Indian painted enamels with figural imagery to have survived. Incidentally, the other two notable examples, hailing from renowned centres of painting, were fashioned by painter-designers well-versed in figure-centric designs. Out of these, an archery ring (Fig.5) of c.1700 from Hyderabad has a synoptic representation of *ragini* Todi.² Fabricated from gold, the enamelling combines *champlevé* and painted enhancements. Within a cusped arch was rendered the pensive-looking *nayika* or *yogini* playing *rudra-vina*, flanked by blackbucks spellbound by the melody. This is undoubtedly one of the outstanding holdings of the al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait. The other important specimen is a plate with the depiction of Shiva and Parvati in their heavenly abode of Kailasha attended by the Dogra king,



Fig.1 : A damsel arranging her shoulder-mantle, detail of the enamelled finial of an ear ornament c.1810, polychrome enamel on gold, Lucknow, Coll.: Jñāna-Pravāha, Varanasi



Fig.2 : Floral bouquet, songbird and a gazelle, detail of the enamelled finial of an ear ornament, c.1810, same as Fig.1



Fig.3 : A dandy with a parakeet, detail of the enamelled finial of an ear ornament, c.1810, same as Fig.1



Fig.4 : Floral bouquet, songbird and a drake, detail of the enamelled finial of an ear ornament, c.1810, same as Fig.1

Maharaja Ranbir Singh (r.1856-1887).³ As early as 1903, George Watt took note of the unusual pictorial appeal of this plate, stylistically "quite unlike anything done at the present day in Kashmir" and resembling "very closely Persian work."⁴ However, we know little about the continuity of this tradition of painted enamels with the rendition of figural compositions at Hyderabad or Kashmir in the successive era yet presume the vital role played by the painter-designers of the region in master-minding such extraordinary artefacts.



Fig.5 : Todi *ragini*, archery ring, c.1700, polychrome enamel on gold, Hyderabad, Coll.: al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait

The Jñāna-Pravāha specimen, datable to c.1810 and attributable to the master painter-enamellers active in Lucknow, is marked by a certain compactness of designing and meticulously stippled finishing of details. In two cusped cartouches appear the head and shoulders portrayal of a pair of lovers while the space in between was filled up with bouquets of roses and an assortment of exotic blooms, songbirds, drake (*Anas platyrhynchos*) and gazelle. The painter-enameller visualized the decorative scheme so as to symbolize the ideal lovers in a *gul-o-bulbul* backdrop, repeatedly eulogized in Iranian poetic masterpieces. The treatment of flowers and birds in glowing colours enhanced with fine stippling, as has been noted earlier, brings to mind the eighteenth century bird and flower paintings of Iran, especially evident on lacquered papier-mache and decorative borders of the albums (*muraqqa*).⁵ The three-quarter portraits of the lovers bearing beguiling smile have strong stylistic connection with the Qajar paintings and polychrome enamels, notably those by Muhammad Baqir,⁶ from the reign of Fath Ali Shah (r.1797-1834). Beyond such stylistic debt, there are details quoted from the contemporary paintings of Faizabad-Lucknow and European prints, namely, the nuanced hand-gesture of the princely lover with a parakeet perched on, and, the sartorial fashion of front-open tunics, blouses with ruffled edging at the cuff and the draping style of the shoulder-mantle without folds. Technically, the piece combines both, the *champlevé*⁷ and *basse-taille* (*partaz*)⁸ techniques. An array of brilliant tonalities consisting of sparkling ultramarine, warm carmine and luxuriant viridian were fused with impeccable mastery for the sake of a painterly efficacy, rounded off with judiciously added touches of liquefied gold (*sona hallkari*).

From 1765 onwards Faizabad, the capital of the dynasty of Navabs from Nishapur, Iran attracted poets and musicians, merchants and artisans. Abdul Halim Sharar presented a vivid picture in his celebrated chronicle:

Wherever you looked in the markets there were stacks of merchandise from various countries, for on hearing that Faizabad was the chosen centre for discriminating noblemen and fashionable gentlemen, merchants' loaded caravans came from every direction.

As they always found a ready sale, there was a steady inflow of the very best quality merchandise. Merchants from Persia, Kabul, China and Europe arrived with valuable goods and the profits they received encouraged them to make further efforts to bring in fresh articles.⁹

He has also endorsed the arrival of the pupils of Agha Abdul Rashid of Deylam, the eminent calligraphist settled in Lahore.¹⁰ Love for Iranian art forms in the circle of elites intensified gradually from the regnal years of Navab Asaf-ud-Daulah (1775-1797) till a marked preference for European oil-paintings, glasses and tapestries, furniture and jewellery altered the connoisseurship of even the less-exalted patrons. The Jñāna-Pravāha example of painted enamel represents a transitional, indeed short-lived, phase in between these two evanescent artistic milieus of Faizabad-Lucknow, the fabled cities of luxury and romance. At this point, a thin web of information passed on by Rai Krishnadasa would tempt us to attribute the piece to the guild of Ustad Kaiser Agha, a master artist in the field of polychrome enamelling (*minakari*). Agha, "presumably an Afghan", came from Kabul and "learnt the Persian art of pink-enamelling which being something entirely new to India, was immensely liked".¹¹ The melancholy fact is that we know almost nothing about his lineage, his active years at Faizabad-Lucknow and his stylistic individuality. In spite of this, we proceed with the guesswork that his Iranian mentor must have been an expert of the figural genre of polychrome enamelling and Agha imbibed every subtle technicality under his tutelage. At the twin Awadh courts, he had a particular clientele with a marked preference for Iranian artefacts and while conceptualizing enamelled jewels like this appropriated heavily from miniatures by the master painters excelling in the delightful fantasies in a hybrid style. Nonetheless, Mir Kalam Khan (c.1710/15-1770/75), "a restless purveyor of novelty", was one such master painter.¹² Transformation and transmutation of motifs in the luxury arts of Lucknow open a fascinating world of creative osmosis. Stephen Markel succinctly summed up the multi-textured context in his brilliant article on the subject:

Given the cosmopolitan artistic interests of Asaf al-Daula, an international cadre of artists, and an abundance of imported works

of art present in Lucknow, it is likely that the distinctive styles of decorative floral imagery that arose in Awadh during this period drew from a variety of sources. This creative process of hybridity and synthesis was paralleled throughout the humanities in Lucknow.¹³

Flamboyant and fashionable, the enamelled jewellery from Jñāna-Pravāha was indeed a nostalgic remembrance of love. However, we know almost nothing regarding the translocation of this piece from Lucknow to Matiya Burj, Kolkata, where Navab Wajid Ali Shah (r.1847-1856) recreated his lost capital on the banks of the Hooghly.

References & Notes

1. Domical in shape, this finial (*chatri*) was fringed with droplets of ruby and, originally, was attached to a gem-entrusted (*kundan*) flower-shaped ear ornament, known as *karanphul jhumka*. It was acquired in Kolkata during late 1980s. The physical details are as follows: polychrome enamel on gold; height 3 cms; diameter 3.6 cms; circumference 11.2 cms; weight 12.9 gms. Collection: Jñāna-Pravāha Museum, Varanasi.
2. Manuel Keene and Salam Kaoukji, *Treasury of the World - Jewelled Arts of India in the Age of the Mughals*, London, 2001, p.82, Cat.No. 6.47.
3. George Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi 1903: Being the Official Catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition 1902-1903*, London, 1903, Plate No.69, p.465.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Maryam Ekhtiar, "Muhammad Ismail Isfahani: Master Lacquer Painter", *Persian Masters: Five Centuries of Painting*, Ed. Sheila R. Canby, Marg Pub., Mumbai, 1990, Pl.1, 4; Eleanor Sims, *Peerless Images: Persian Painting and its Sources*, New Haven, 2002, Pl.88, p.80; Milo C. Beach, *The Imperial Image: Paintings for the Mughal Court*, Washington, 1981, pp.78-79, pp.167 & 177.
6. Sims, *ibid.*, Pl.84, p.78.
7. Gordon Campbell (Ed.), *The Grove Encyclopedia of Decorative Arts*, Vol.I, New York, 2006, p.353.
8. *Ibid.*

9. Abdul Halim Sharar, *Lucknow: The Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*, tr. & ed. By E.S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain, New Delhi, 2001, p.33.
10. *Ibid.*, p.103.
11. Rai Krishnadasa, "The Pink Enamelling of Banaras", *Chhavi: Golden Jubilee Volume*, ed. A. Krishna, Varanasi, 1971, p.330.
12. Terence McNerney, "Mir Kalan Khan", *Masters of Indian Painting: 1650-1900*, Vol.II, Eds. M.C. Beach et.al., Zurich, 2011, pp.607-622; Malini Roy, "Origins of the Late Mughal Painting Tradition in Awadh", *India's Fabled City: The Art of Courtly Lucknow*, New York, 2010, pp.165-185.
13. Stephen Markel, "The Blaze of Wealth and Magnificence: The Luxury Arts of Lucknow", *India's Fabled City: The Art of Courtly Lucknow*, p.204.