

News Release
Public Information
Department

**Dispersed Hamzanama Paintings Reunited after 250 Years in
The Adventures of Hamza at the Brooklyn Museum of Art
November 1, 2002, through January 26, 2003**

July 2002

The Adventures of Hamza, on view November 1, 2002, through January 26, 2003, at the Brooklyn Museum of Art will reunite 58 of the finest surviving Hamzanama paintings from international public and private collections. Only 200 of the paintings from this extraordinary set are believed to exist today. The exhibition is the first time that the paintings have been seen together since the 18th century.

Between 1557 and 1572, a group of Persian and Hindu artists fulfilled an extraordinary commission from the Mughal emperor, Akbar, who ruled much of what is now northern India from 1556 to 1605. Still a teenager, Akbar commanded them to create the *Hamzanama*—an epic organized into 14 enormous volumes, illustrated with approximately 1,400 boldly conceived paintings. Together these formed the world's most accomplished illustration of a beloved Persian story: the larger-than-life exploits of Amir Hamza, a hero akin to Robin Hood and Indiana Jones. Hamza's much embellished legend features encounters with giants, demons, and dragons, as well as abductions and hair-raising chases.

The Adventures of Hamza far surpasses in size all previous exhibitions of *Hamzanama* paintings, including the installation at the British Museum in 1976, and the four shown at the BMA in 1994. The MAK-Austrian Museum of Applied Arts/Contemporary Art, Vienna, the principal lender to the exhibition, with the world's largest holding of *Hamzanama* paintings, has lent a core group of 28 paintings; their holdings have never been seen outside Austria.

Hamzanama Paintings

page 2

Additional lenders to the exhibition include the Victoria & Albert Museum, The British Museum, the al-Sabah Collection, and a dozen major U.S. museums.

The survival of some of the other paintings in the exhibition from the Victoria & Albert Museum is a miraculous feat in itself: they were discovered hanging as window shades in huts and houseboats along the Jhelum River in India.

Four paintings come from the Brooklyn Museum of Art's own collection. They are considered masterpieces, and are in a superb state of preservation. They are entitled *Arghan Dev Brings the Chest of Armor to Hamza*, *Zumurrud Shah Reaches the Foot of a Huge Mountain and is Joined by Ra'im Blood Drinker and Shinning Ruby*, *Umar, Disguised as Mazmahil the Surgeon Practices Quackery on the Sorcerers of Antali*, and *The Ayyars, Led by Songhur Balkhi and Lulu the Spy, Slit the Throats of the Prison Guards and Free Sa'id Farrukh-Nizhad*.

The *Hamzanama* is similar to other Persian epics because it was recited to a group rather than read in private. Each recitation was given a particular flavor by the storyteller, who departed freely from the text, which varies from manuscript to manuscript. The paintings were intended as visual complements to these public recitations. Each painting in the *Adventures of Hamza* exhibition will be accompanied by a wall label summarizing the related text so that visitors can fully understand a scene's meanings. The accompanying catalogue illustrates each painting with a translation of its narrative and outlines the legend's major cast of characters.

The exhibition will also clarify the technical features, including large scale and dynamic composition, that make these paintings unique in the history of Islamic art. By integrating Hindu and Persian styles, the *Hamzanama* launched the Mughal painting tradition, renowned for lush color and intricate patterns. An introductory section will reveal how innovative these paintings were by presenting other images of the period, including work by two Persian masters whose arrival in India led to the new Mughal style.

Hamzanama Paintings

page 3

The Mughal Empire was founded in northern India in 1562 by Babur (r.1526–1530). After a temporary exile in Iran, Babur's son Humayun (r.1530–1540, 1555–1556) returned to India, bringing with him the leading Persian artists Mir Sayyid 'Ali and Abd al-Samad. Both headed the large workshop of Persian and Indian artists who created Akbar's *Hamzanama*. At this time, the energy and palette of the Indian painting tradition was melded with the fine draftsmanship characteristic of 16th-century Persian painting to create a wholly new Mughal Indian painting style.

The Adventures of Hamza is organized by the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. It is made possible by generous grants from Juliet and Lee Folger/The Folger Fund and the Starr Foundation, with additional funding from the Friends of the Freer and Sackler Galleries. This exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

The Adventures of Hamza is curated by Dr. John Seyller, a leading scholar on Indian and Mughal painting. Amy Poster, Curator and Chair of the BMA's Department of Asian Art, and Aimée Froom, Hagop Kervorkian Associate Curator of Islamic Art, will coordinate the exhibition for the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

A fully illustrated catalog has been published in conjunction with the exhibition, authored by Dr. Seyller, Associate Professor of the University of Vermont with contributions from Dr. Wheeler Thackson of Harvard University and Dr. Ebba Koch of the University of Vienna. Antoinette Owen, senior paper conservator at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, has written an essay on the technical aspects of the paintings.

Following the Brooklyn Museum of Art presentation, *The Adventures of Hamza* will travel to The Royal Academy of Art, London, from March 15 through June 8, 2003, and the Museum Rietberg, Zürich, from June 28 through October 20, 2003.

Hamzanama Paintings

page 4

Media Contact: (718) 638-5000

Sally Williams, Public Information Officer, ext. 331

James Gordon, Media Relations Manager, ext. 334

Reggie Cameron, Sr. Public Information Coordinator, ext. 354

Adam Husted, Public Information Associate, ext. 330

www.brooklynmuseum.org

GENERAL INFORMATION

Admission:

Contribution \$6; students with valid I.D. and older adults \$3. Free to Members and children under 12 accompanied by an adult. Group tours or visits must be arranged in advance by calling extension 234.

Museum Hours:

Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.;
First Saturday of each month, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; all other Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.;
Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.

Directions:

Subway: Seventh Avenue express (1 or 2) to Eastern Parkway/Brooklyn Museum stop; Lexington Avenue express (4 or 5) to Nevins Street, cross platform and transfer to the 1 or 2. **Bus:** B71, B41, B69, B48. On-site parking available.